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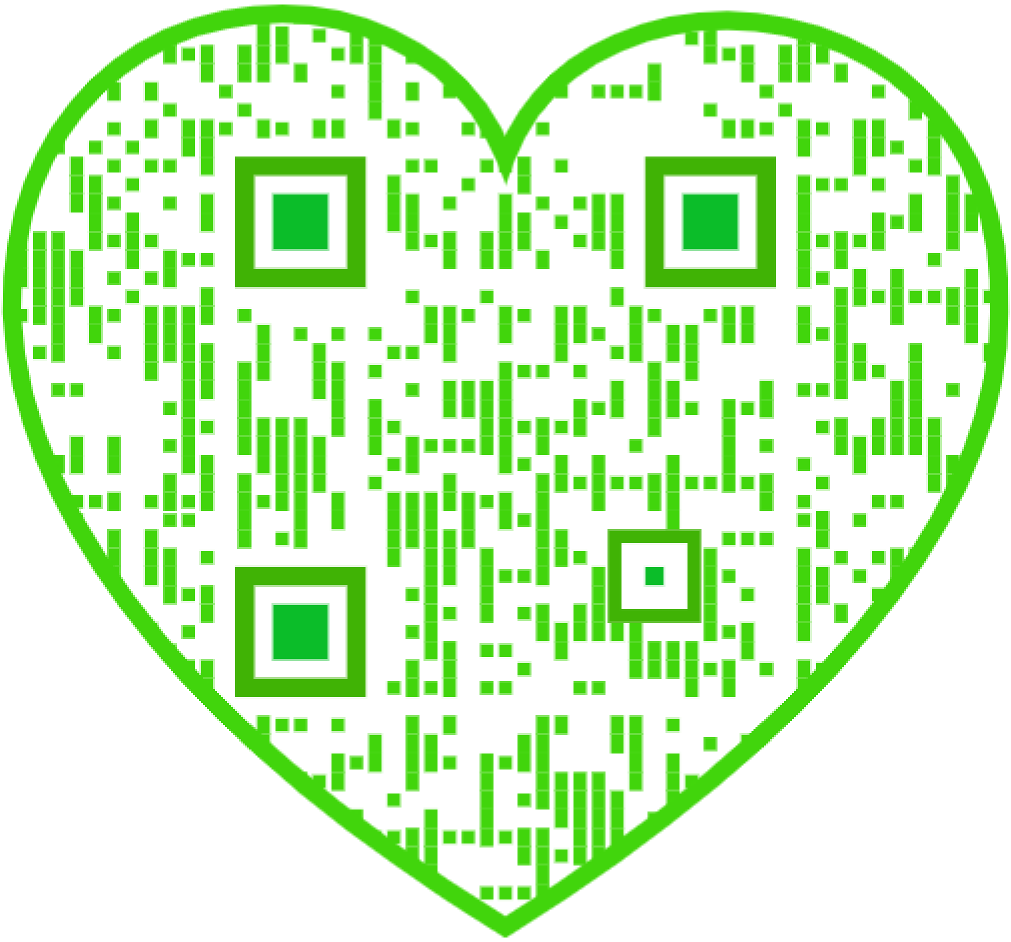

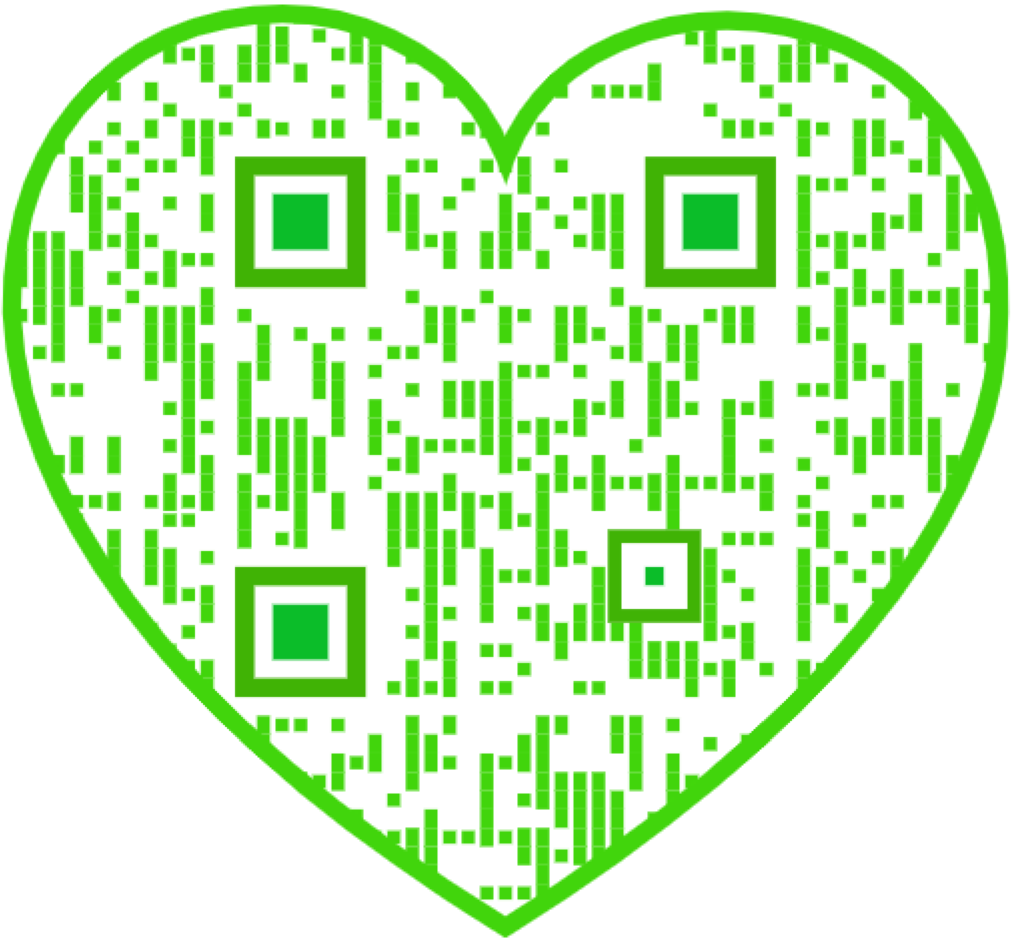

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Agenda

Photography: Ferrari

MOTORSPORT

They're smiling now. But how long can Hamilton's Maranello honeymoon last?

Damien Smith F1 writer

▶ **When Ferrari's new SF-25 Formula** 1 car hit the track for the first time at Fiorano in February, a clip went viral of a *tifosi* cutting down a tree because it was spoiling his view. You don't get that at Silverstone. As Lewis Hamilton has surely discovered by now, nothing about driving for Ferrari is quite the same – or, for that matter, as sane – as life at other F1 teams.

It's clear he felt the full power of that old red magic from the moment he rolled out of the Shell garage for his first Ferrari run back in January. The *tifosi* had gathered en masse for that occasion too, just as they always used to on such days – just as they always will. 'I've been lucky enough to have many firsts in my career, from the first test to the first race, podium, win and championship, so I wasn't sure how many more I would have,' said Hamilton afterwards. 'But driving a Ferrari for the first time this morning was one of the best feelings of my life.'

He's savoured what's surely the ultimate for any racing driver: the honeymoon period of becoming an F1 driver for the most illustrious car maker in the world. But as that initial buzz wears off, what will be the reality of Hamilton's stint at Ferrari? What's he in for, and how will he handle it on the days when the sparkle goes missing?

Hamilton, Vasseur, Leclerc: the dream team?

'I used to say driving for Ferrari is nearly as good as winning a world championship,' says Jody Scheckter, the South African who achieved in 1979 what Hamilton would love to pull off in 2025: winning a title for Ferrari at the first time of asking. Jody was 29 when he joined Ferrari back then. Hamilton is attempting the same at 40.

'Working for Ferrari is so unbelievable,' says Joan Villadelprat, a Spaniard who for three years at the end of the 1980s became the F1 team's first non-Italian chief mechanic. 'For example, Ferrari has owners' clubs all round the world. Every race I went to I had to go to dinners with these clubs, in Montreal, Adelaide, wherever we went. Without doubt it is different to any other team. It now works more like an English team, the way of approaching the work at the circuit. But the consequence of working at Ferrari is unique. Nothing compares.'

Hamilton will have so much coming at him in months to come – not least the challenge of dealing with a young, fast team-mate. Scheckter knows all about that. In the early months of his first season Gilles Villeneuve blew him away. The odds of an echo in 2025 via Charles Leclerc, 13 years Hamilton's junior and considered by many the fastest of the current generation over one lap, are short.

'It makes you pull out another level,' Jody recalls. 'Gilles won the first two races [actually, the third and fourth of 1979. Jacques Laffite won the first two, for Ligier] and I was the number one driver in contract. In reality he was becoming number one. So I just had to knuckle down and do better, which I did. It took everything – and more.'

Scheckter won back-to-back at Zolder and Monaco to take the points lead, scored consistently through the summer and clinched the title with two rounds to spare, leading Villeneuve to a Ferrari 1-2 at Monza. Hamilton can only dream.

Seven Ferrari F1 drivers have managed to win in their first race for the team, one of them being Nigel Mansell who took the most unlikely of victories, 10 years after Scheckter's title, in Rio in 1989. Villadelprat was Mansell's chief mechanic that day. He recalls Mansell's doubts about John Barnard's stunning but revolutionary Ferrari 640, the first F1 car driven through a semi-automatic gearbox, with steering wheel paddles for the changes – sensational then, common today on road cars.

'It was the best car ever designed by John Barnard,' says Villadelprat. 'But in testing it was not reliable. Anyway, Mansell arrived. He was an old-fashioned man: "Where's the gearlever? I don't want to drive like that." He drove at Fiorano – and after 10 laps he said "This is brilliant!"'

In Rio, Mansell was so sure his Ferrari debut wouldn't last long he tried to book an early flight home via a British Airways captain he met on the grid… Yet less than two hours later, there he was, taking the chequered flag ahead of Alain Prost's McLaren. Villadelprat drew blood to get that svelte 640 across the line. 'Mid-race we had a radio ▶

The badge and the buzz are real

call from Mansell: "The steering is gone, the steering wheel is moving!" he says. "Okay, come in, come in. John Barnard and myself, we decided to change the steering wheel. John took the old wheel, I put the new one on, pushed it with my hand and Mansell went out and won the race. When he left the pitlane I felt wetness in my glove: the radio switch was caught in my skin. I hadn't even felt it.'

Hamilton is less likely than drivers of previous generations to face the chaos of Ferrari's infamous internal politics. He signed largely because of Frédéric Vasseur, who for the past two years has brought a calm authority back to Ferrari in a manner last seen during the Michael Schumacher era, when Jean Todt and Ross Brawn protected the F1 team from the caustic friction that traditionally undermines life at Maranello. Vasseur is an old friend who ran Hamilton in Formula 3 and GP2, and their iron-clad relationship will be crucial if the seven-time champion is to thrive at Ferrari.

It certainly wasn't calm during Villadelprat's spell in Italy, which coincided with Enzo Ferrari's death in August 1988. Enzo used to call him Capitano, he says. These were turbulent times, amid a power struggle involving Ferrari's son, then known as Piero Lardi, and executives from Fiat as the car manufacturer's control increased over the jewel it had owned a stake in since 1969.

'For Lewis, the politics is less now because you only have one boss – Vasseur,' points out Villadelprat. 'But now the politics has moved: it will be between the drivers, and Leclerc is very political. He's well integrated inside Ferrari and it puts him in a very strong position. He speaks Italian perfectly too.'

Jody Scheckter: 'Lewis has been fantastic, probably the best of all time. But you can't stay good for the rest of your life'

The language barrier is a moot point. Hamilton has openly admitted he doesn't speak the lingo, but then again, neither does Vasseur. Neither did Scheckter, for that matter – and he still doesn't, even though officially he's an Italian resident today.

'Old Man Ferrari loved Gilles; he spoke the language and I didn't,' says Scheckter. 'But I never felt out of it. I had Brenda Vernor' – Enzo's British-born private secretary and a key figure in Ferrari folklore. 'After every practice and race I'd write my comments to Brenda and she would then give them to Old Man Ferrari. I always felt good being there.'

Villadelprat comments: 'I hope he learns Italian, but doesn't read the press.' Ah, the Italian media: the viper whose bite remains as venomous as it ever was. 'Talk to your mechanics, get integrated with the team and say

Scheckter: lemons then, beef now

something to the public when you do a press release – but don't talk to the press,' advises Joan. 'Don't even look at them!'

Scheckter chuckles about his relationship with journalists and takes some pride in his status as a three-time consecutive winner of the 'lemon prize' – for being the most difficult F1 driver to deal with. 'At least I went to fetch my prize, so it wasn't too bad,' he says with a smile. 'I always said to everybody in the team, "Let's stick together; don't listen to the stuff that they write." I think guys before me worried more. People like [Carlos] Reutemann. But we stuck together and it didn't really bother me what they said.'

Then again, imagine outspoken Scheckter in F1 today, with social media waiting to pour scorn and castigation. It would probably be unfair to say Hamilton faces more pressure than his predecessors, but the nature of modern communication and the toxicity in tone – direct from the public more than the media – is harder to insulate against. Then again, Hamilton has been F1's most famous driver since 2007. 'For me, I always kept the mania in perspective,' says Scheckter. 'When people were jumping at me for an autograph, I knew the next year they'd be stamping on my body going to the next guy. Lewis is so popular now he's on a different planet.'

So predictions: how will Hamilton fare at Ferrari? 'George Russell outperformed him at Mercedes last year,' says Scheckter. 'You can't stay good for the rest of your life. Lewis has been fantastic, probably the best of all time. Schumacher had the same result [in terms of world championships], but he tended to be dirty in his racing. Lewis has always raced clean. But at 40? People are different. I got bored and retired early, then changed careers. Lewis still seems to be enthusiastic and is in a good place personally, although that isn't always good for performance.'

Villadelprat is more emphatic. 'If the car is good Hamilton will beat Leclerc and win the championship,' he states. 'If the car is not so good Leclerc will beat Hamilton. Simple. Hamilton has got too many things in life to think about, has a lot of money, has seven championships, so he's not going to risk his life to gain one more position. I saw it in all the F1 champions I knew: when the car is good you see the real driver.'

The car just needs to be as good as it looks

No new ideas here

Jake Groves Deputy news editor

The clever city car

▶ **Almost echoing Marks and Spencer,** Toyota says its FT-Me concept is not just a microcar. It's seen what Stellantis can do with the Citroën Ami, Fiat Topolino and Opel Rocks-e, and thinks it can do better. FT-Me is a ground-up Toyota project, highly digital, with loads of personalisation options. Legally it's categorised as a quadricycle, which limits its top speed to 28mph and allows teens to drive it – although Toyota reckons its appeal should be much broader than that. It's an EV, with a target range of 62 miles. No production date yet but Toyota's thinking when, not if.

The tech-filled estate

▶ **Now available in brown, Audi's** latest A6 has come back with engines, complementing the electric e-Tron versions – and keeping its original A6 name. Is there much that makes the A6 particularly special, compared to the A5, A6 e-Tron, Q5 and Q6 e-Tron models it shares so much with? Er, well… Audi says it's the slipperiest combustion-engined car it's ever made – so that's something. The boot is disappointingly small for an estate this size, mind. It should be the basis of one hell of an RS version, with a V6 PHEV powertrain using the same ace engine that's in the SQ5 featured in First Drives in this issue.

The retro-futurist sports car

▶ **This one's divided opinion. It's** either a ham-fisted mess of modern features applied to an old design… or it's exactly everything a modern sports car should be. Either way, the new range-topping Morgan Supersport uses an evolution of the familiar bonded aluminium platform, is powered by a turbocharged BMW 3.0-litre straight-six making 335bhp and weighs a refreshing 1170kg. Morgan bills the Supersport as its most usable car yet with seats that 'no longer vibrate' (yes, really) and an actual boot. Prices start from £105,000, and Morgan has an in-depth configurator for you to sink your teeth into.

The hot electric crossover

▶ **An e-SUV with oodles of** power isn't anything new. But the Lexus RZ is designed to be a bit smarter than that. There's the usual extra level of fine trimmings compared to mechanically similar Toyotas, plus the debut of a steer-by-wire system, and this time around there's also an F-Sport version, with a more aggressive bodykit and 402bhp. The F-Sport gets Interactive Manual Drive, which effectively acts like the Hyundai Ioniq 5 N's N Shift; paddles attached to the yoke-like steering wheel can simulate gearchanges for that little extra involvement on the school run.

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NEW CARS

The new S-Class isn't an S-Class

Jake Groves Deputy news editor

Grille team didn't get the memo about clean, simple design

Expect to see these details on other new Mercs

▶ **The days of the Sonderklasse** being Mercedes-Benz's technology pioneer are over. In a major break with tradition, it's the smallest car in Merc's new line-up that has become a springboard for a technology revolution.

At a star-studded reveal event overlooking Rome, Mercedes spent an entire day telling the world's media just how significant the new CLA is. 'This day marks the beginning of a new era for Mercedes, an entirely new digital experience and ultimate evidence that the future is electric,' says chairman of the board Ola Källenius.

The CLA includes several significant technological advances, and signals Merc's seriousness about making use of the software and engineering learnings from the EQXX concept, which will underpin an enormous overhaul of the model range. Mercedes chief technology officer Markus Schäfer calls it 'a firework of launches' – more than 20 cars in the next three years.

Beneath at least four of those, including the CLA, is the new Mercedes Modular Architecture. MMA is all about efficiency and versatility, launching with electric and hybrid versions simultaneously. A compromise? Not so, says Christoph Starzynski, Merc's head of product strategy. 'This has the right combination of handling and technology, and I'm not worried about the competition.'

EVs running on the platform will benefit from new-generation electric motors (with up to 93 per cent efficiency, which Merc says is its best ever for a production car) matched with new high-density batteries and a two-speed transmission on the rear axle designed to help reduce energy consumption at motorway speeds.

MMA uses an 800-volt electrical architecture, meaning up to 320kW charging speeds are possible. That results in the base CLA 250+ with EQ Technology (yes, that clunky suffix is part of the name for the EV) claiming up to 492 miles according to WLTP testing.

Hybrids, too, have benefitted from ground-up rethinking. For the CLA and its wider family, Merc has developed an all-new engine, codenamed M252. It's a 1.5-litre four-cylinder unit, designed to be used as part of a non-plug-in hybrid system, and is mated to an equally new ▶

No A-Class hatch, but an estate is coming

eight-speed 'e-DCT'. The engine is smaller and lighter than the four-cylinder used in the outgoing A-Class and CLA. With a 1.3kWh battery pack, it provides a super-efficient system for those who aren't quite ready for electric. Hybrid versions are set to launch a little after the EV, but *CAR* can confirm engine outputs of 134bhp, 161bhp and 188bhp – likely badged CLA 200, CLA 250 and CLA 300.

'We feel you're reaching diesel-level efficiency with this hybrid system,' says Mercedes powertrain engineer Karsten Krebs. It's capable of engine-off propulsion, too.

Mercedes isn't offering a PHEV, so confident is it that the hybrid and BEV between them satisfy the needs of a wide variety of potential buyers. 'We think the hybrid is the best combination we can offer for those who aren't completely ready for electric,' says transmission engineer Jan Becker. 'If you have the option to charge anyway, then the electric option is what you should go for,' adds Krebs.

The launch event in Rome was teeming with supermodels and young media influencers. Music artists Camilla Cabello and Ice Spice were in attendance, and singer Tyla performed live – dancing around CLAs on stage. If you have no idea who these people are, you may not be among the key target audience.

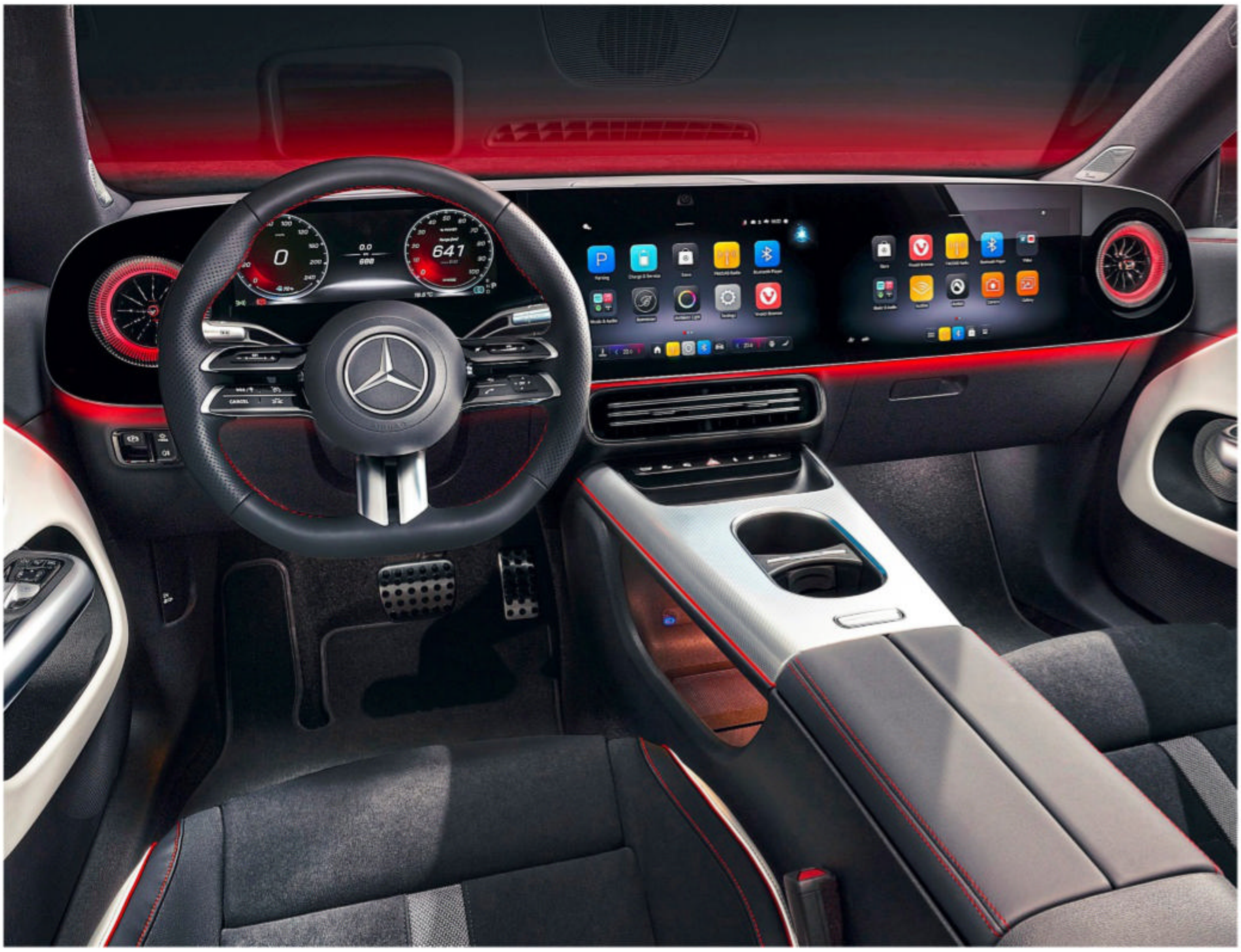
That's reinforced when you get inside the CLA. Even if you're familiar with Merc's recent approach to tech, this interior takes the 'digital experience' to a new level of overload. The cars at the unveiling were fitted with Merc's MBUX Superscreen – a full-width glass dashboard panel with three displays inset; it won't be standard on every CLA. It's similar to full-width treatments on recent Mercs, but here it's running a new generation of operating system, incorporating an AI assistant that makes use of ChatGPT and Google's Gemini, and using Google Maps (in the Western world) instead of Mercedes' own system.

The CLA's interior takes the Mercedes digital experience to a new level of overload

As it's suggested to Magnus Östberg, chief software officer, that many of Mercedes' more traditional clientele might not actually want to talk to their car, he insists this latest system is intuitive and simple. 'You don't need to remember exactly what to say any more,' he says. 'You can speak in a way you naturally do and it'll do the rest.'

Will.i.am's AI-powered interactive music platform RAiDiO.FYI, which acts as a digital DJ and information provider, will be available to install on the CLA. Games you can play directly on the passenger display including *Angry Birds*, and you'll soon be able to play console games via the cloud; Merc showed us *Forza Motorsport* being played via a controller plugged into one of the USB ports.

Schäfer talks of 'Level 2++' driver assistance, effectively allowing the car to handle more driving in more circum-



CLA is first to get the latest infotainment

stances than ever, even in chaotic urban environments. The CLA's 'surround navigation' displays all the driver assistance systems that are active, as well as a 3D representation of the car in the instruments. Mercedes says the tech means drivers will 'benefit from improved situational awareness, seeing what the CLA sees and how the assistance systems support them.'

That's an awful lot of innovation for Merc's smallest car. It's a shame, then, that the CLA's bodywork is so… predictable. Schäfer told *CAR* in 2024 that Mercedes would be stepping away from creating cars that look like bars of soap and sticking to its 'iconic' designs. And yet as Gorden Wagener, Merc's head of design, tells the CLA event about purity and 'taking details away' to keep designs clean, we can't help but scoff. A fake grille arrangement with 142 individually animated LEDs, for example, isn't everyone's idea of design purity.

Either way, the amount of new technology on board and the engineering developments are enough to put the CLA head and shoulders above natural rivals such as the Audi A3 saloon and BMW 2-series Gran Coupe, at least on paper. It's the sort of night-and-day difference that traditionally the range-topping S-Class has enjoyed when compared to any would-be competitors.

So where does that leave the S-Class, if it's no longer the model that gets all the clever kit first, before it trickles down to the rest of the range? Merc execs have different perspectives. Starzynski says there's a precedent: 'In general, it's just a matter of what model you start with. Go back to 2018 and the A-Class was the first car with MBUX. The latest E-Class, for example, was technically the first car to have elements of MB.OS.'

Östberg notes: 'The fact this was the starting point was simply down to timing reasons. One vehicle had to have it first. Naturally, the S-Class will get this same technology, but what I'd say with the CLA is that the technology is dedicated to those in the front. Where does the owner sit in an S-Class? There'll be more emphasis on the rear-seat passengers when it comes to the S-Class.'

DESIGN TRENDS

New Volvo estate? Forget it. Forget saloons too

Curtis Moldrich Digital editor

▶ **Volvo's new ES90 is simultaneously** the spiritual successor to the S90 saloon, and the closest thing to an estate Gothenburg has made in years. But it's neither saloon nor estate, and nor is it a high-riding crossover – that's the job of the EX90. We might want Volvo to keep building saloon and estates, but Volvo says that's just not the way the world works any more.

Our misty-eyed nostalgia for estates doesn't materialise where it counts, on the balance sheet. In an increasingly competitive market, Volvo must bank on what works: cars that combine everything we want; that are big on volume but low on cost.

'It's expensive to bring different models to the market, and it's expensive to keep those models in the market,' Volvo CEO Jim Rowan explains at the ES90's launch. 'We're making very conscious choices about where we want to play the game.'

Life is simpler since Polestar split from its parent company. 'We're a single-brand company, Volvo, that's it. And we do 30, 40, 60 and 90 – so we have a nice stack,' says Rowan. 'We do SUVs, sedans and wagons at the moment, and the question is do we renew all of those?'

Design chief Jeremy Offer is very clear that the ES90 does not fit in with conventional ideas: 'It is in a class of its own. It's got a long wheelbase, pushing those wheels into the corner of the car, short front and rear overhangs.' Its jacked-up ride height puts it somewhere between a normal saloon and an SUV. And it's not a booted saloon but a hatchback. 'It is fundamentally a large sedan, but with these sorts of nuanced changes that we enable.

'This is about really fundamentally understanding our users and our customers,' Offer says of the ES90. Volvo has, he says, been thinking differently about the whole automotive experience. 'It's enabled us to sort of tear up the rule book a little bit, quite honestly.'

In the same way that consumer demand has blurred the lines between Apple's laptops, tablets and smartphones, demand is now pushing Volvo's designers to think past traditional body styles.

The shift to electric powertrains is also a big factor in the change of body style, with underfloor batteries making everything taller. The 800-volt ES90 uses the same SPA2 platform as the EX90 and Polestar 3, but is first to get dual Nvidia Drive AGX Orin chips.

So committed is Volvo to its simplified strategy that it'll be retrofitting early ES90 and Polestar 3s with the new chips and installing them in later models from the off. The benefits are clear: by reducing hardware and software fragmentation, Volvo can increase the efficiency of updates, like Apple does. Soon all EVs will be on the SPA2 and SPA3 platform, making the cars that do make it off the drawing board easier to update over the air.

Rowan's pragmatic approach leaves little room for romantic attachments to traditional saloons or estates. 'We're in a Darwinian event here where it's tough, and there's all these tariffs and stuff like that. So, the guys who figure it out quicker are going to come out strong.'

Who thought the BMW 5-series GT would be so influential?

As Apple blurs the lines between phone, tablet and laptop, Volvo is thinking past traditional body styles

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Maserati at its best straddles tradition and modernity

INDUSTRY

Maybe Stellantis is the problem, not Maserati

Gavin Green Contributor in chief

▶ **Bob Drake competed in only** one Grand Prix, the US GP of 1960, and finished 13th. His Maserati 250F, the most beautiful and one of the most successful F1 cars of the '50s, was outclassed by the new-age machinery.

Stirling Moss's winning Lotus 18-Climax was small, mid-engined and showcased the future. Drake's 250F, on the other hand, was a glorious relic of the past, and finished seven laps adrift. It would be the 250F's last GP.

There is a parallel between the 250F in 1960 and Maserati today. A company whose cars once oozed desirability is now a serial underperformer. A performance brand famous for its tuneful and characterful engines, and some wonderful old GTs, must now navigate an uncertain new age. And just as the 250F finished its career in the autumn of 1960, so there are doubts about Maserati's future today.

Various owners have grappled with familiar and recurring problems: investment was delayed, models aged, and so the circle of strife continued

Only a few months ago, Carlos Tavares, then boss of Maserati's owner Stellantis, threatened to shut down unprofitable brands, a clear reference to Maserati.

Last year global sales collapsed to 11,300, from 26,600 the year before. In the UK, they were down 47 per cent. In Italy, by 41 per cent. Production fell 64 per cent. Even new models, like the Grecale SUV, suffered big falls.

In total, Maserati sold fewer cars than Ferrari, and was not far ahead of Lamborghini – both of which operate on a much higher and more profitable plane. Instead of investing more in its sole luxury brand to boost product, Stellantis has written off £1.2 billion of investment in Maserati, leaving some future models in doubt.

Under-achievement at Maserati is not new. Fifty years ago almost exactly, Maserati was put into liquidation. Every decade since it's regularly missed sales targets, as various owners – including Ferrari – grappled with familiar and recurring problems: investment was delayed, models aged, and so the circle of strife continued.

There have been some gloriously good cars, but many of those have soldiered on well past retirement age. Platform sharing to go downmarket hasn't helped. The Grecale SUV uses Alfa Stelvio underpinnings. It is an appealing sports luxury SUV, but the electric Folgore version costs over £100,000.

Just over a decade ago, then-owner Fiat said Maserati would sell 75,000 cars a year. In fact, in 2025 it will be lucky to sell one-seventh of that.

Like Jaguar, Alfa Romeo, Lotus and Aston Martin, Maserati is a wonderful old European brand that has struggled for decades. Stellantis has threatened to transform Maserati but, so far, there are no signs of a Jaguar-style *rivoluzione*.

The management, though, has changed. A new CEO, Santo Ficili, was appointed by Tavares last October. A new head for Maserati Northern Europe, which includes the UK, was installed at the same time. Mariangela Del Vecchio, ex BMW, will tell you that in the past year three key models were phased out – Quattroporte, Levante and Ghibli – so it's little wonder sales were affected.

On the other hand, new Folgore EV models were introduced, which should have boosted demand. There were technical issues that affected production and, as with most new EVs, sales have disappointed. 'New entry-level versions of the Grecale [the 300] and GranTurismo and GranCabrio [the 490 versions] are now available, as well as the new GT2 Stradale and a full range of Folgore models,' Del Vecchio points out.

She promises that 2025 will be better. An enhanced customisation programme should also earn good money: it's a major source of Ferrari's impressive profits.

A new Quattroporte – which also replaces the Ghibli – is due in 2028 and a new Levante in 2027. The current plan is for Maserati to be EV-only by 2030, but that is surely now in doubt, given the shaky EV market, Donald Trump's pro-oil blusterings and slow initial sales of Folgore variants. 'We are committed to electro mobility but we are customer driven and will produce what our customers want,' says Del Vecchio. The electric MC20 Folgore has been canned.

The GranCabrio and GranTurismo Folgore models are technically ambitious EVs: bespoke 800-volt architectures, dedicated three-motor powertrains, low centre of gravity and scorching performance elevate them above any other platform-shared Stellantis cars. The GranCabrio Folgore is the world's only GT convertible EV.

I drove both electric GranCabrio and GranTurismo soon after talking to Del Vecchio. They are exquisitely handsome cars and fearsomely fast, the most powerful Maseratis ever – and with more torque than the original Bugatti Veyron.

Jaguar insists its new-age EVs will sell because of the sheer desirability of their design. If so, the outstandingly handsome GranCabrio and GranTurismo should also succeed. (Although they're expensive: the GranTurismo Folgore starts at just under £180,000.) And you'd expect a new Quattroporte to look wonderful, given past efforts.

Del Vecchio insists EVs are an opportunity for Maserati. 'Electric power suits luxury and grand touring very well.' The idea of Stellantis selling Maserati is also quickly dismissed. When Tavares left last December, the second Stellantis brand that chairman John Elkann visited was Maserati, she says. Elkann is also executive chairman of Ferrari, another brand with a distinguished racing past – but also a highly successful present.

It makes you wonder if a switch from Stellantis to Ferrari management would do the trick. Some of that Prancing Horse magic is clearly needed at its Modenese neighbour.

MC20's electric version has now been cancelled

McLaren's next decade looks... powerful

Ben Miller Editor

▶ **Until recently,** being a test driver was perhaps the best job in the world: sit in a few meetings, nod a bit, spend the day on the ragged edge, home in time for an ice bath and a calming re-ordering of your sock drawer.

It's suddenly become a far less tempting career, though, and for that we can blame the McLaren W1. Fancy not merely driving the 1258bhp, 988lb ft supercar (an exclusively rear-wheel-drive supercar, you'll recall) but spanking it sufficiently hard, on the regular, that your tepid telemetry doesn't get you sacked and you're able to proffer something like meaningful feedback? Me neither.

The new MHP-8 engine – the internal-combustion element of the W1's hybrid powertrain – will, McLaren hopes, punch the W1 into the public consciousness in the same way the P1 did all those years ago.

This engine will also power a new generation. 'A considerable amount of work and investment has gone into developing this new powertrain,' explains a McLaren spokesperson. 'We are introducing it on the W1, but we would not be investing in this engine for just 399 cars. This high-performance hybrid V8 will power the next generation of McLaren supercars.'

In development for four years, the new V8 blurs the line between production automotive engineering and motorsport technologies. It alone is good for 915bhp and 664lb ft. And yet it's allied here with an e-motor so potent and yet so hushed you can, if you listen hard enough, hear McLaren's test drivers firing up LinkedIn.

Part of their problem's going to be this powertrain's remorselessness. The new engine makes more torque than the most powerful version of the previous unit everywhere, and by a hefty 30 per cent margin. It'll also rev to 9200rpm (the Lamborghini Temerario's V8, with its hot-in-vee architecture, spins faster but makes less power and torque) thanks to a ruthless programme of component light-weighting, including hollow valves and camshafts.

And then there's the hybrid system. It brings another 342bhp and 325lb ft to the party, spinning at up to 24,000rpm and delivering a comparable specific output (23bhp per kg; the motor weighs just 15kg) as an F1 e-motor, McLaren claims. That's because it's cut from comparable cloth, being derived from IndyCar's e-motor.

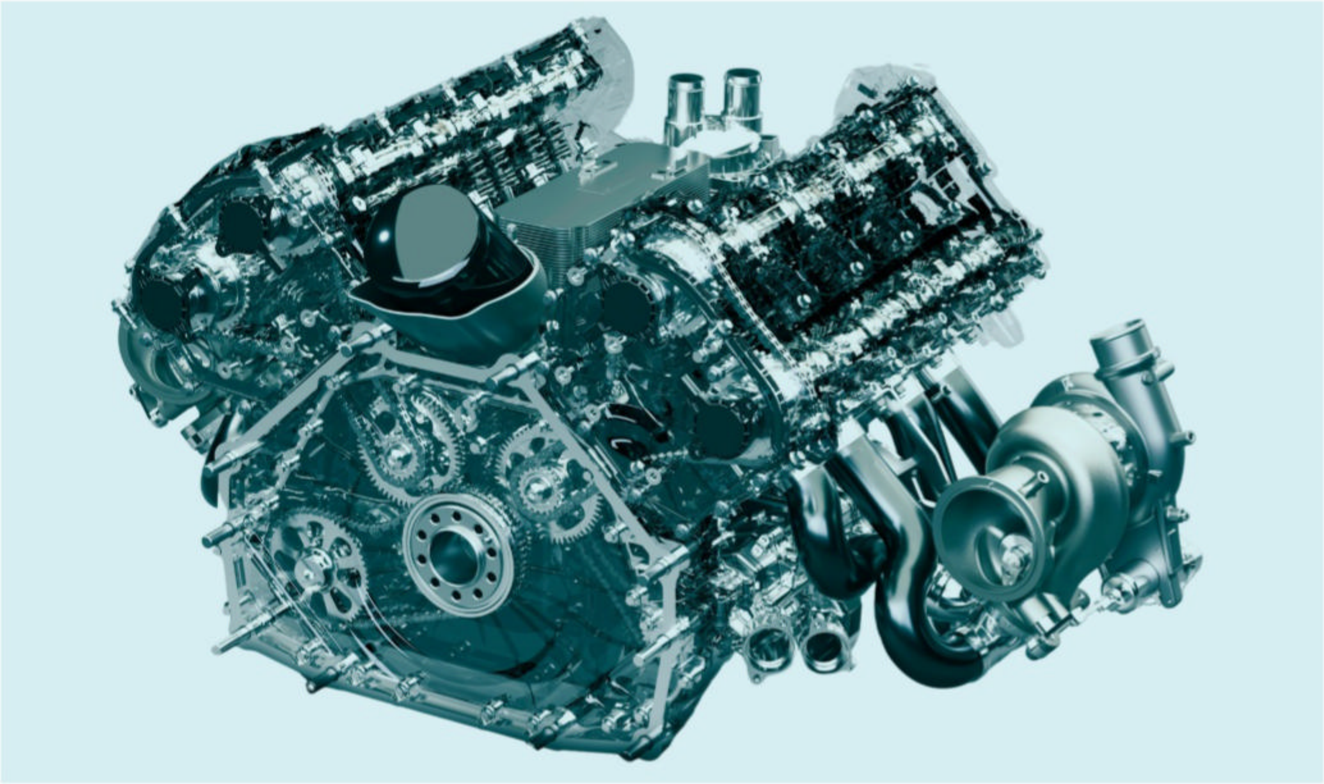
Get clear of built-up areas and the W1 claims 0-124mph in 5.8sec, 0-186mph in under 12.7 seconds and a top speed pegged at 217mph. McLaren's also promising a more emotive soundtrack than was mostly the case with its previous V8, plus so much torque you'll be able to rotate the thing with a mere tensioning of your right ankle.

And if you were hoping for a breather once you've exhausted the modest 1.3kWh battery, no dice.

'In a 0-186mph sprint, we've still got 50 per cent of the battery left at 186mph,' explains powertrain chief Richard Jackson. 'We can get to that 217mph top speed and maintain it without full EV support – you will get there and still have surplus power available. And of course, the moment you lift you're regenerating again…'

Truly there's no rest for the wicked.

Outboard turbos, as opposed to hot in vee



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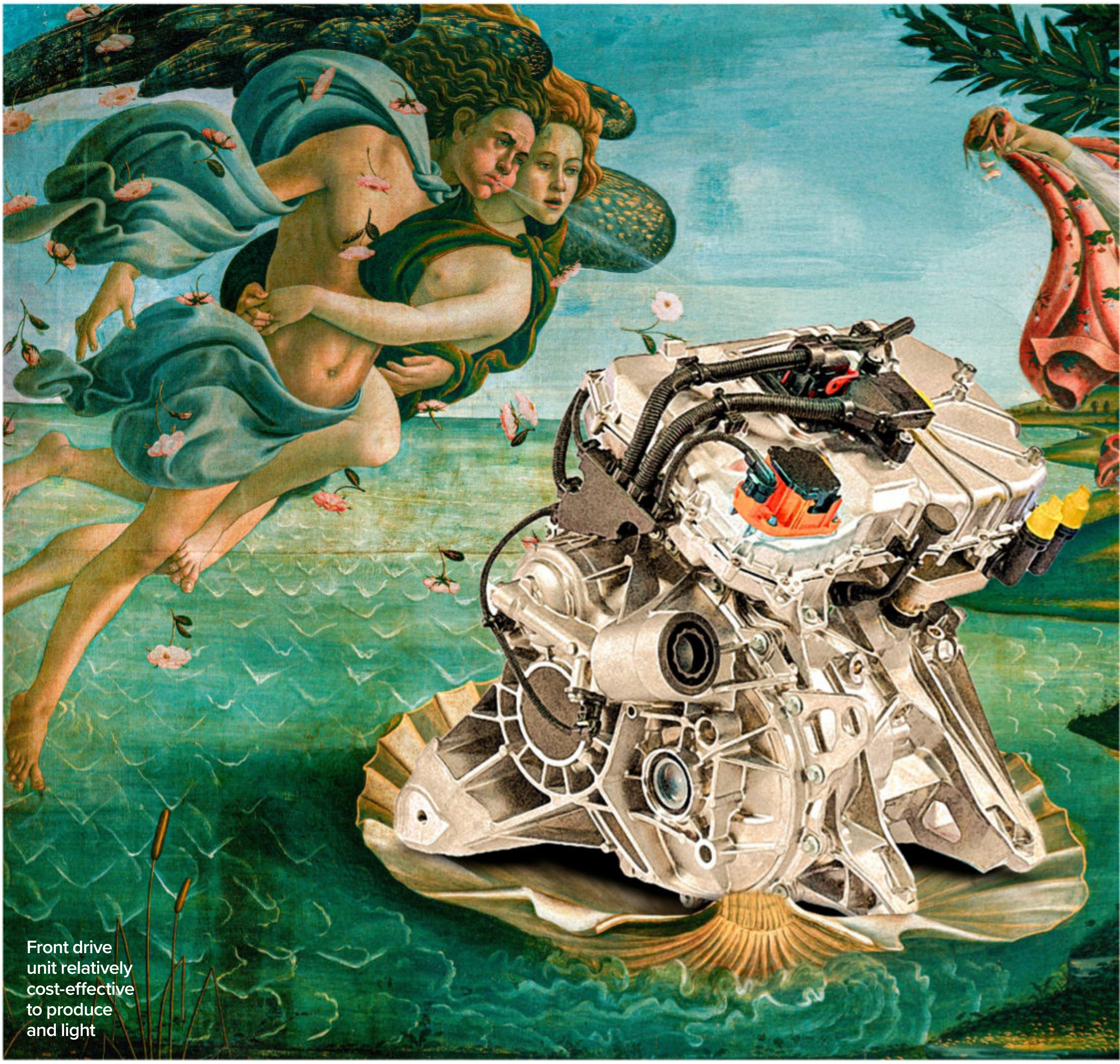


Front drive unit relatively cost-effective to produce and light

Source image: Getty Images

EV INNOVATION

BMW and the fine art of futureproofing

Ben Miller Editor Mal Bailey Illustrator

▶ **For a moment the grey** clouds of uncertainty part and a blinding shaft of clear thinking breaks through. And to be clear, this is not new clear thinking. BMW may have pulled the covers off its next-gen electric powertrains recently, as it gears up to deliver the first of its Neue Klasse cars, the iX3, later this year. But the broader plan hasn't changed. And as the world goes to hell in a handcart, that powertrain plan – to do it all, as well as possible, and almost entirely in-house – looks increasingly prescient.

'We retain our technology-open approach [offer a range of powertrain options and let buyers choose] and our philosophy is the same: production follows the markets, and the supply chain follows the production,' explains BMW's Dr Joachim Post, board member for purchasing and supplier network.

But there can be no doubt, either, of the potential for growth if BMW can do something special with this next electric chapter. It's well aware of this, hence the reprisal of the Neue Klasse descriptor. Back then, the original Neue Klasse cars transformed BMW from bit part to premium powerhouse. The challenge now? To become synonymous with EV excellence in the same way it did with great engines. After all, you can count on the fingers of one finger the number of manufacturers with a headquarters that's also a 22-storey monument to the four-cylinder combustion engine.

A lighter, more efficient and more energy-dense modular toolkit, BMW humbly describes its new Gen6 tech as a 'quantum leap' – as you'd hope given it'll go into the first electric BMW to wear a full-house M badge.

BMW describes Gen6 as a 'quantum leap' – as you'd hope given it'll go into the first electric M car

The headline claims for the new 800-volt battery architecture, which switches from prismatic cells to 46mm lithium-ion cylinders in two lengths (95mm and 120mm), are faster charging (by 30 per cent), a 30 per cent increase in range (with some future models going further still), a 20 per cent increase in overall vehicle efficiency and a massive 40-50 per cent cost reduction versus a comparable Gen5 powertrain.

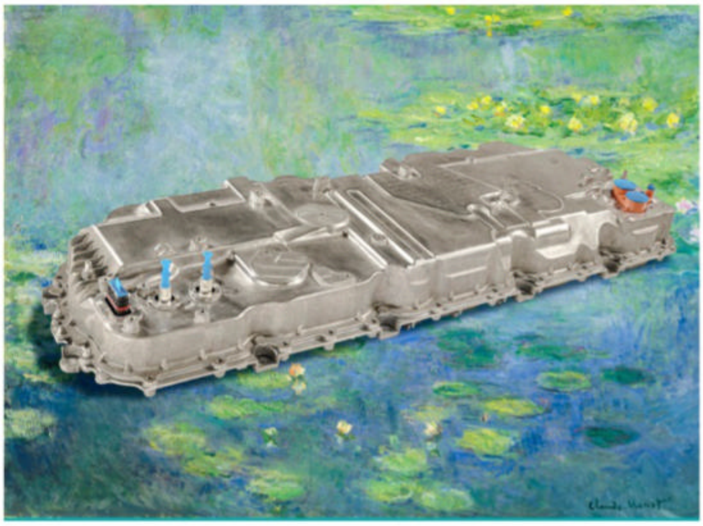
A step change, then, though some of that progress will go into BMW catching up rather than stretching ahead. Though powerful, the Gen5 kit isn't the most efficient when compared with some rivals. An i4 M50 we tested in 2023 averaged 2.2 miles per kWh. Across the same roads on the same day, a Tesla Model 3 and Hyundai Ioniq 6 managed 4.8 and 4.2 respectively. More recently, our long-term i5 eDrive 40 has averaged an unspectacular 2.7 miles per kWh.

It's claimed Gen6 also delivers gains in terms of packaging. The new battery is flatter than before, making it compatible even with low-slung M cars, and is more efficient by design, with no internal modules thanks to its direct, 'cell-to-pack' construction. Versus Gen5 packs, the battery's external mountings are far simpler and lighter, too, and the Neue Klasse cars will use the battery as a stressed member to save weight.

BMW isn't making its own cells, but it is doing virtually everything else. A further five battery plants are in the works (five existing facilities build the Gen5 batteries), in Bavaria, Hungary, China, Mexico and the US. The Group plant at Landshut is gearing up to produce sufficient 'Energy Master' control units (developed entirely in-house) to supply those plants, and on the motor side BMW's Steyr plant is being modified (as part of a €1bn investment) to be able to churn out up to 600,000 motor units per year. Steyr will also produce the inverters, while the motor casings are being cast at Landshut.

Just as different engine architectures suit different applications, so BMW's using a mixed approach with ▶

Energy Master control module sits on top of the battery



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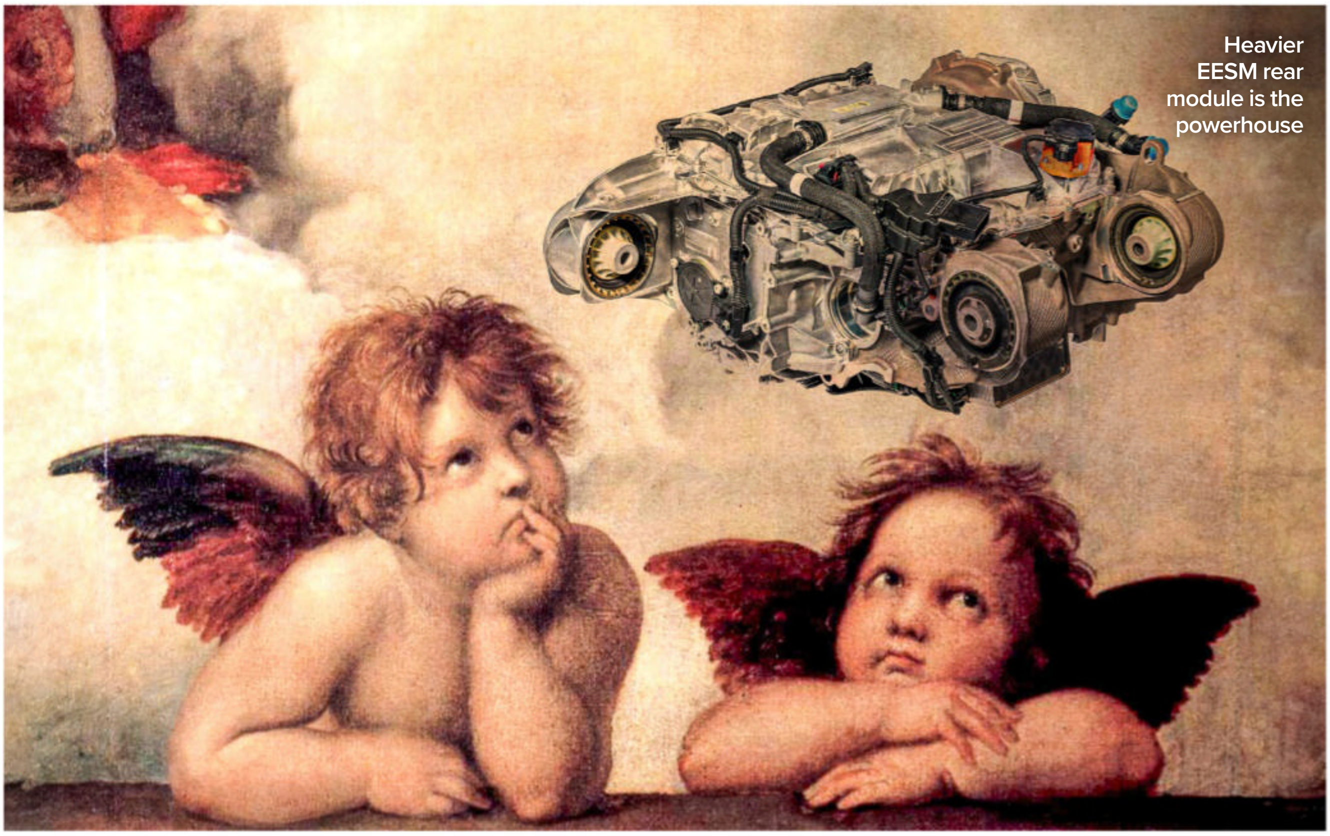

Heavier EESM rear module is the powerhouse

Source image: Getty Images

Gen6. Typically, it will deploy the more expensive, high-performance EESM (electrically excited synchronous motor) units on rear axles and its more cost-effective and compact ASM (asynchronous motor) units on the front. In terms of outputs, BMW is rating the 120kg rear units at 197bhp to 296bhp and the 70kg fronts at 118bhp to 178bhp.

It's long been a fan of EESMs for their sustainability (no rare earth metals). It also reckons they're efficient under part load and powerful at speed. The new rear drive units contain a bunch of patented tech and promise quieter and smoother running, a lighter and more rigid housing, big power and torque, and reduced losses. As before, they're self-contained, bundling together the motor, transmission and the inverter (now silicon carbide; more difficult to make but more efficient).

So far, we know Gen6 BMWs will use an EESM motor module on the rear axle and the ASM unit up front, for all-wheel drive, but it has confirmed the Gen6 toolkit can be used to create cars with three or even four e-motors. Though it's reluctant to discuss other combinations just yet, two-wheel-drive Gen6 cars will likely be rear-wheel drive: 'It's in our genes,' explains Michael Salmansberger, head of electric drive. 'At BMW we all like the rear-wheel-drive feeling.' And the fact that BMW's been running a circa-1300bhp, quad-motor electric M3 prototype for a while suggests M cars may use the high-performance EESM units on both axles.

With a 50 per cent reduction in production costs on the batteries and 20 per cent on its motor units, does Gen6 promise price parity with piston-engined BMWs? 'You are successful only if you have the right price for the customer, but you also have to be profitable,' explains Post. 'We must balance these things, and despite the huge cost reduction with Gen6, costs are still the main challenge with electric cars.' We'll take that as a maybe.

BMW is rating the 120kg rear units at 197bhp to 296bhp and the 70kg fronts at 118bhp to 178bhp

More certain is a new era of performance. Talk to M boss Frank van Meel and he's always at pains to point out that M is totally embedded within BMW, not merely a tuning shop for its output. As such the division's involvement in developing new platforms begins at the beginning and doesn't let up: a little more stiffness here, *bitte*; the scope for a wider track there…

'When we develop a new technology, we're always thinking about it from the entry level of the core models right to the high end, and that's M from a performance perspective,' confirms Post. 'M's requirements are factored in early, so we can get the technology right and scale it for our whole range.'

'Frank was not annoying at all,' smiles Roland Welzmüller, vice president of electric engine technology. 'M was involved from the very first moment. For this new generation we are planning to have M inside this portfolio. So from the very first day of this strategy it was involved, and we have found dedicated solutions for M which we will tell you more about when the time is right.'

In terms of power-to-weight ratio there will be no compromise – the first all-electric M car 'will be a real M car', Welzmüller says. 'If you are coming from today's [twin-turbo straight-six] M3, and you are thinking about a fully electric M3, customers do not want to have any kind of limitation.'

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All Toyota engines will get a sprinkling of this

NEW ENGINES

No more dull Toyota engines, ever

Jake Groves Deputy news editor

▶ **Your next RAV4 PHEV** or Corolla hybrid will be full of engineering direct from Toyota's Gazoo Racing division. Why? Because Toyota has left development of its entire new generation of engines to the obsessive engineers who like to build World Endurance racers and rabid hot hatches, while testing everything to destruction along the way.

It's a new perspective, flipping automotive convention on its head. Instead of the performance arm being called in at the end of a project to find some upgrades, here it's the tuning team who are doing the heavy lifting.

It's also a lot of pressure on Bart Eelen, head of TGR and all Toyota's many motorsport activities. 'It goes back to Toyota's idea of using motorsport as a test bed and as a way to develop new things,' he tells *CAR*. 'I think that's something that Akio [Toyoda, former CEO, now chairman and 'master driver'] introduced. Toyota hadn't thought that way before.'

The new engines, currently in development, will be four-cylinder units with capacities of 1.5 and 2.0 litres. Says Matt Harrison, chief corporate officer for Toyota Europe: 'These engines will feature new technologies and new thinking. For instance, they will have a shorter piston stroke that allows them to be much more compact. That allows us more freedom for our designers and engineers when it comes to packaging.'

They're designed to run on conventional petrol, and there's speculation that outputs could be as high as 400bhp. However, they're also designed to be able to combine with e-motors to create hybrids (both with and without plug-in capability). And they are being developed to run on hydrogen combustion fuel – a continuing obsession of Toyota's.

'New engines are pretty rare these days, but we really wanted to do this,' says Eelen. 'The block is super compact, and the centre of gravity is super low – and the engine combines both efficiency and performance.'

Toyota is collaborating with Subaru and Mazda to make combustion even more efficient, as all believe engines will play a vital role in achieving carbon neutrality. Toyota CEO Koji Sato says there is 'a uniquely Japanese way' of tackling this issue, and that all three companies 'share the same aspirations and will refine engine technologies through friendly competition.'

The current mule for engine development is the GR Yaris M Concept, where the M stands for 'midship', sparking speculation that Toyota will build a new MR2, to which Harrison says: 'We'll have to wait and see.' The prototype engine in the M Concept, codenamed G20E, will be competing in a race in Japan this year as part of the development programme.

Global markets are moving at different speeds when it comes to carbon reduction, and Toyota believes offering multiple pathways to reaching net zero will mean getting there faster. Says Toyota chief branding officer Simon Humphries: 'We don't claim to be a visionary in our way of thinking. The idea that multiple propulsion systems can exist together is as old as the car itself.'

INNOVATION

Meet the next Gordon Murray supercar

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **Coffee pods. Jean-Phillipe Launberg has** carrier bags full of them in his office at the Gordon Murray Group. They will be recycled and used in the lightweight supercar prototype that's being created for 2027 by a multi-company project he's leading.

He's serious: 'We've been using virgin aluminium [in Gordon Murray Automotive cars], because that's the strongest you can get. But something that started at Innovate UK has been progressing, using consumer scrap.

'We have all the aluminium we need in the UK – we need to re-use it. So let's turn recycled consumer scrap into an aluminium that's actually stronger and better than the virgin one we use today.'

It won't be easy. After all, just about everything Gordon Murray has put his name to over his decades as a boundary-pushing F1 and road-car engineer is already ultra-light.

But Murray surrounds himself with kindred spirits who aim very high. If anyone can do it, they can. In 2027, a prototype supercar built around a new monocoque will be demonstrated at a proving ground, showcasing various lightweight and sustainable materials and techniques. After that, the learnings from the project could spread far and wide.

'For our types of cars, which do very low mileage on average, a lot of the environmental impact is not in the usage phase but in the manufacturing phase,' says Launberg. 'So we're using materials which have been used before, and looking at how to minimise the use of carbonfibre at the design stage, and minimising waste in the production processes.'

The consortium working on Project M-LighteEn also involves composites specialist Carbon ThreeSixty, aluminium experts Constellium and metallurgists at London's Brunel University. The targets are ambitious: 25 per cent lighter than a comparable chassis today, 50 per cent greener, and using 80 per cent recycled ultra-high-strength aluminium. Funded by the government-backed Innovate UK and the Advanced Propulsion Centre (a non-profit that helps find and allocate R&D funding), the project will lead to the creation of 160 new jobs and around £150 million of economic activity, if all goes well.

'We have low volumes and we are willing to experiment. We are innovators and early adopters, and then it can be used in higher volumes across the industry in different applications,' says Launberg. 'No one will say "I'll make 500,000 vehicles a year" if it's the first one. Everyone likes to be the second.

'In this project we will design a supercar structure, because we will be the first ones to use the solution. That's what we have in our hearts and what we know how to do best. We are not developing a future model, but future models will be based on this work, drawing on these learnings.'

But the big win comes if and when those learnings spread into the wider industry: 'The solutions are totally powertrain agnostic, whether you're carrying a battery pack or a V12 or a three-cylinder mild hybrid.'

Inside every pod, a supercar waiting to get out

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NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

DACIA BIGSTER

Gambler, anonymous

Dacia risks heading into new territory with its most expensive, least quirky car ever. Time for a trip to Monaco, one of the costliest corners of Europe

Words Ted Welford **Photography** Jordan Butters

Taller and longer, but narrower than the Duster

Family look dominates over Bigster uniqueness

Ah, Monaco. Gucci, Ferrari, yachts, caviar, James Bond, champagne… and Dacias. We thought we'd be conducting some kind of fish-out-of-water experiment by taking the keenly priced new Dacia Bigster to one of the most expensive places in Europe, but it turns out there are loads of Dacias around these parts. But not the Bigster – ours is the first, and turns many heads through its combination of unfamiliarity and rugged good looks.

The Bigster is Dacia's largest – and arguably now its most important – car. It's the Renault-owned Romanian car maker's first foray into the family-aimed C-segment once dominated by Vauxhall Astras and Ford Focuses, but now filled with the likes of the Nissan Qashqai and Kia Sportage. SUVs of this size are hugely popular, accounting for half the top 10 of 2024's best-selling cars in Europe. If Dacia's got the Bigster right, the potential's huge.

It's also a risk for Dacia, pushing it out of its comfort zone, away from its smaller, budget-focused roots and straight into the hands of buyers who demand more – more space, more equipment and more quality. For a brand that prides itself on essentials, there's potential that it's stretched itself too far. But when you see it for the first time it's pretty familiar; it doesn't look all that much different to a Duster viewed directly from the front or rear.

We have two days with the Bigster to clock up some serious miles up in the southern Alps and on the ever-glamorous Cote d'Azur, all the while weighing up if it's the all-round package family SUV buyers expect, and finally finding out whether it can cause a stir in Monaco.

Leaving Marseille, the first stop is to head to some vineyards principally in search of lunch. Wanting to make tracks in vaguely the right direction, I set the nav for a route running parallel to the main A8 motorway that connects the key cities along the French Riviera.

These turn out to be some of the roughest main roads in France. Forget the illusion of mainland Europe's effortlessly smooth tarmac – here it's like we've landed back in the UK by mistake. That's not helped by hideous weather; it doesn't stop raining for two days.

It's a perfect testing ground for the Bigster and its 19-inch alloys – the largest fitted to a Dacia yet. The ride is a little rough on broken surfaces but does a better job of soaking up bumps than many in this class, dominated by cars with wheels a few inches too large. Entry-level Bigsters get 18s. By the way, there's no option for steelies on the Bigster (unlike the Duster).

Noise from chunky mirrors can be intrusive

Big car, big sandwich. Size isn't, however, everything

As the road opens up, I see the sign I've been craving for hours – FINALLY a boulangerie. Ham and cheese baguettes acquired, and with the boot doubling as a picnic bench, it's time to inspect some of the Bigster's practical elements. It's the first Dacia with an electric bootlid, though in true Dacia fashion it's been engineered on a tight budget: only one of the tailgate struts is electric. There's no kick sensor, either. That's not on Dacia's 'essentials' list, and it's hard to disagree, as they rarely work and tend to leave you waving a leg around as if you're working up to an interpretive dance routine.

The boot is massive – 677 litres below the flimsy cover. A Duster's boot is hardly small at 517 litres, but the Bigster's stretches back miles and is the perfect place to enjoy a crusty loaf brimmed with ham and cheese and watch a very rainy world go by. Between bites, I take time to consider some of the Bigster's other practical merits – handles in the boot to drop the rear seats, a proper spare wheel beneath the false floor and the sheer space in the rear. ▶

Pick-up: 0 miles

We've brought a lot of luggage but it's no trouble for the massive boot, all 677 litres of it. We needn't have packed the sun cream, though.

33 miles

First stop, lunch. Can confirm that two baguettes slot neatly into the Bigster's front cupholders. Triangular sandwiches not such a happy fit.

51 miles

D
130
km/h
110

Time to cover some distance to get to our overnight stop. The Bigster is the first Dacia with adaptive cruise control and I'm very glad of it.

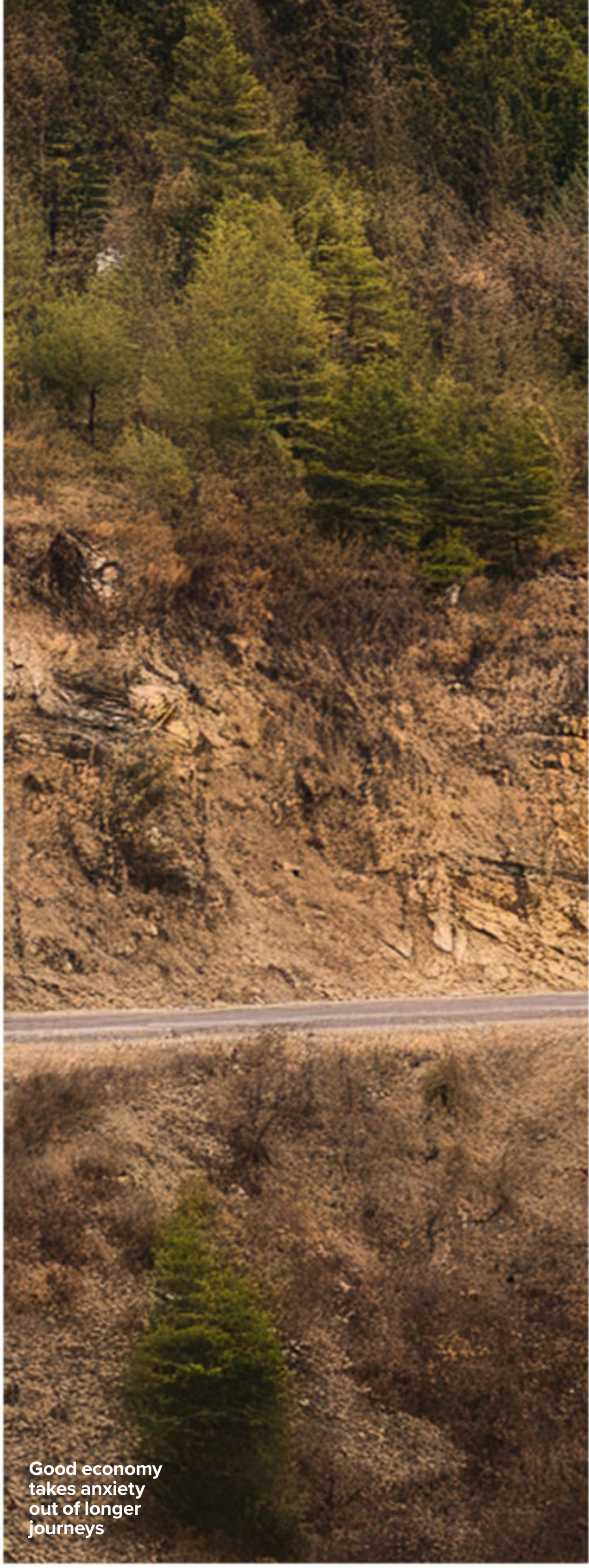
While Fiat is focusing on small cars, Dacia's moving on up

Baguette devoured, and aware that the light will soon fade, it's time to hit the road again and make some real progress as we join the A8 to get us to our overnight stop in Grasse. The Bigster neatly gets up to the 130km/h limit (about 80mph), and now we're making good progress. It's relaxed enough at this speed, although it lacks the refinement of a Qashqai and Sportage. The Bigster comes with a new windscreen, shaped for improved acoustic performance and thicker than the Duster's, but it's no match for the wind noise generated by the blocky door mirrors.

Adaptive cruise control is another first for Dacia, and since I'm pretty lazy on longer trips I enjoy the consistency that ACC affords. It works well – intelligently slowing the car down without jamming the anchors on just because there's a car on the horizon, and speeding up to overtake as soon as you indicate.

The Bigster starts at £24,995, making it one of the most affordable cars in this class. It's £6000 less than the cheapest Qashqai but matches the price of an MG HS, a larger and better-equipped car still. Dacia is also offering a new hybrid version, priced from £27,095, but £29,495 in the case of our Journey-trim test car. It's a different set-up to the Duster and seven-seat Jogger, using a new 1.8-litre petrol engine paired to the same two electric motors as the older cars. It puts out 153bhp and uses an automatic gearbox made up of four gears for the engine and two for the electric motors. Gone are the days when Dacia got Renault's hand-me-downs, as the Bigster is the first car from across the Renault Group to get this hybrid system – a testament to how highly the brand is valued by Renault.

As we leave Grasse the following morning, it's time to start heading north into the mountains to test the ▸



Good economy takes anxiety out of longer journeys

54 miles

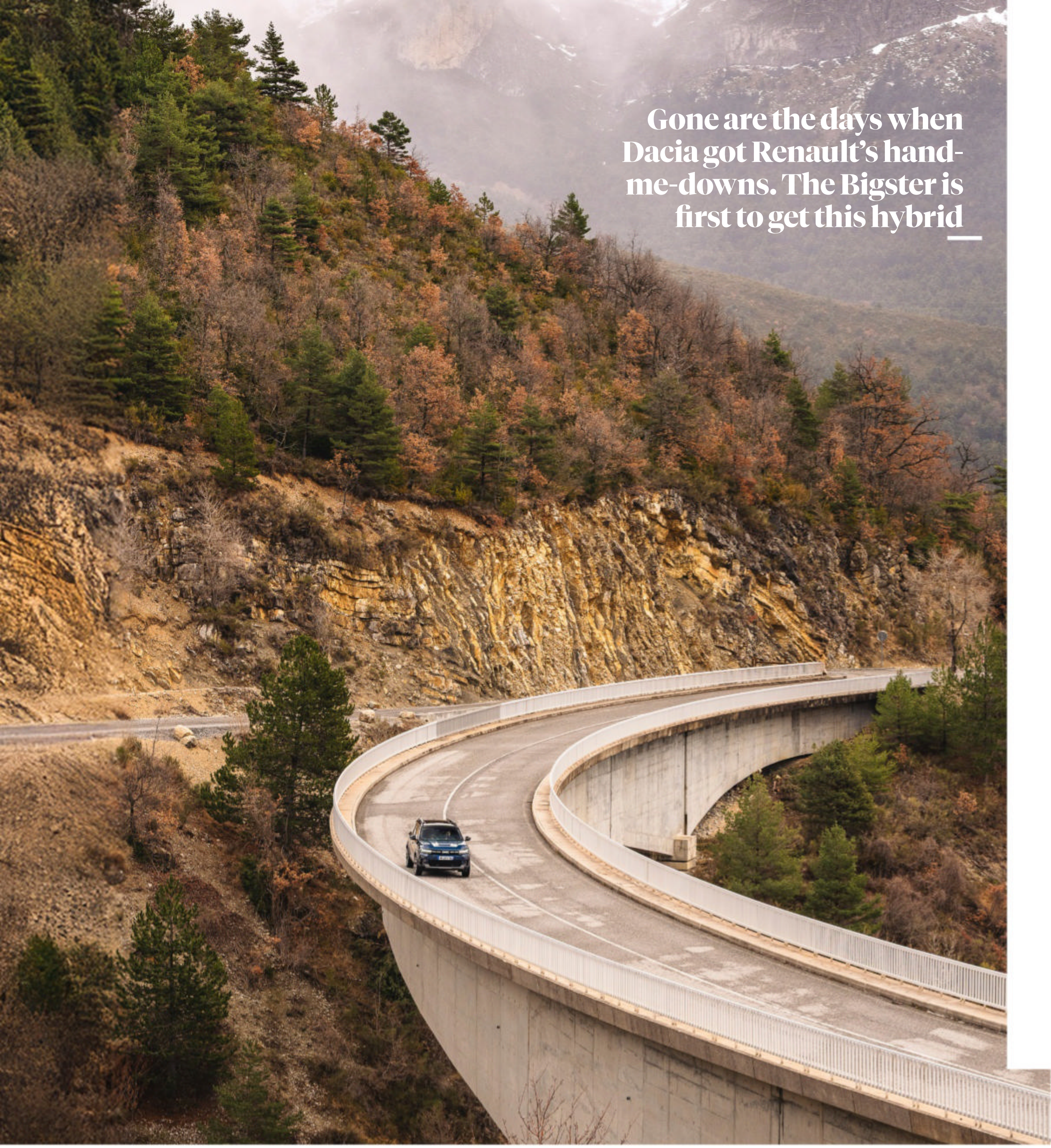
Renault's MySafety button allows all the pre-configured safety assists to be turned off with only two button presses. Memo to other car makers: copy this.

138 miles

We stop off in Nice. A terrible idea on a Friday when traffic is gridlocked. We sit in a tunnel for 20 minutes, being very British about queueing.

141 miles

We chance upon Motors Corner, an eclectic classic car dealership in the centre of Nice. The Bigster attracts a lot of attention from the staff.



Gone are the days when Dacia got Renault's hand-me-downs. The Bigster is first to get this hybrid

168 miles

Bigster is the first Dacia to get features including two-tone paint and a panoramic glass roof. 'Essentials' in this class, reckons Dacia. Hmm…

185 miles

In this part of France Dacias are everywhere. We stop to compare it to a stranger's Duster. Biggest difference is the rear three-quarter section.

202 miles

We start heading north, ignoring the winter tyre signs as the weather looks good. A snowy layby is as much of the white stuff as we encounter.

Light, precise steering, but the grip runs out too soon

Boot is usefully big; there's no seven-seater

User-friendly interior layout let down by hard plastics

Does it look different enough from its Kia and Nissan rivals?

Local farmers returning from their morning boulangerie run gravitate towards the Bigster

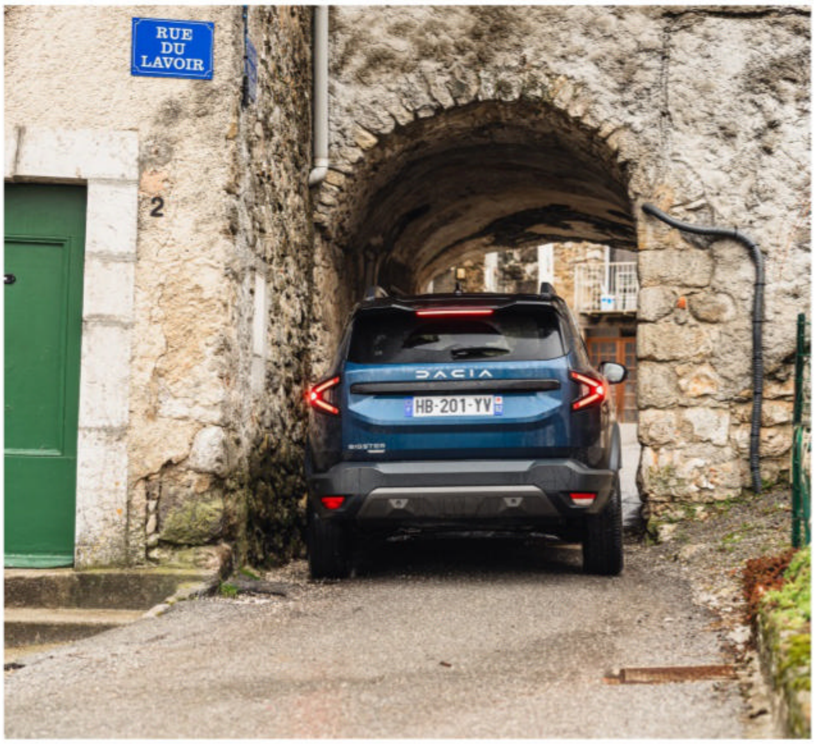
Bigster's attributes on the twisties. It's mid-March and though the winter tyre warnings will remain in place for a couple more weeks, we chance our luck with the Bigster on its year-round rubber (having checked the detailed local forecast before doing so). There's a 4x4 version – a mild hybrid based on the regular 1.2-litre petrol engine – but it wasn't available for this test. Besides, as much as we like to drive a four-wheel-drive Dacia, next to nobody in the UK buys them; most Bigsters sold will be front-drive hybrids.

The hybrid powertrain is good, and far better than I remember the previous Renault/Dacia system being. It's smoother, more responsive and much quieter on a steep incline – though it's hardly the last word in refinement, it must be said. By now I'm negotiating the tight switchbacks on the D2 around Gréolières in between all kinds of rock formations. My ears are popping as we gain altitude, and I don't find myself welcoming the moo-ing sounds of the hybrid system.

This is the road used in the 1995 James Bond Film *GoldenEye* for a chase between the Ferrari F355 and Aston Martin DB5, and though I'm more stirred than shaken (sorry), the Bigster is better on this sort of tarmac than I'd have predicted. The steering is light but precise, with a level of fluidity to it that makes it easy to place on these tight hairpins. At 1419kg it's very light for a hybrid SUV (a Qashqai is 200kg heavier) and you feel the benefit through corners, where it's impressively nimble and not too inclined to roll.

It's a pity it runs out of grip so early. It really struggles for traction out of a corner and resorts to understeer. You might choose to deploy the argument that no Dacia SUV is going to be driven like this, but I'm not convinced, especially given you're never far away from an enthusiastic Sandero on the back of your bumper around here.

The next part of our route takes us through a section of France that time forgot – a quaint village called Soleilhas that looks as though it's straight out of a '70s French drama. Local farmers returning from their morning boulangerie run gravitate towards the Bigster as if we're circulating Knightsbridge with an unreleased Ferrari. They speak as much English as I do French (*nul points*) but I'm fluent enough in sign language to tell it's a resounding success, with thumbs-ups galore and lots of admiring glances. It's a fair bet that many of these people will be driving a Bigster in 15 years.



But that's only if the Bigster fits through the exceptionally narrow streets of their commune. Approaching one archway I'm seriously wondering if I'm about to damage the car. Thankfully there's a 360° camera system (including lenses on the mirrors), which proves its worth as I squeeze the Dacia through an archway that seems to be closing in as I get towards the end.

While the Bigster is 20cm longer than a Duster, a bizarre quirk of its packaging means it's ever so slightly narrower. It results in quite a thin cabin for a C-segment SUV, and though that's not ideal if you want to seat five occupants regularly, I'm grateful for the lack of width in this instance.

From here we head to the mesmerising Gorges de Daluis. Red rock faces appear out of nowhere and the road meanders one way around the formations and the other through them as tunnels. It's a magnificent engineering effort and spectacular to drive through. Though the rain has well and truly set in, it's a stunning backdrop. But we can't appreciate it for too long, as it dawns on us that we've eaten up a great chunk of the day doing things we hadn't really allowed time for, so now we need to floor ▸

PLUS

Big on space; low on price; good hybrid system

MINUS

Lacks refinement; interior feels cheap in places

223 miles

Simple touchscreen does most of the basics just fine, although our test car's sat-nav is annoyingly glitchy. Google Maps to the rescue.

292 miles

A spirited drive gets us to Monaco while it's still daylight, and we turn a few heads. Forget Ferraris – we're probably in the rarest car here today.

295 miles

A fitting end to a very wet trip, stopping off near the superyachts in Monaco's Port Hercules. And it doesn't look out of place.

Bigster may not be perfect but at least it has a roof

Data

PRICE
£29,495 (Journey Hybrid 155)

POWERTRAIN
1793cc 16v four-cyl, 1.4kWh battery plus two e-motors, auto, front-wheel-drive

PERFORMANCE
153bhp @ 5300rpm, 127lb ft @ 3000rpm, 9.7sec 0-62mph, 112mph

WEIGHT
1419kg

EFFICIENCY
60.1mpg (official), 48.7mpg (tested), 105g/km CO2

ON SALE
Now

RATING
★★★☆☆

it to our end point, Monaco.

Doing so gives me time to ponder the cabin, which is similar to the Duster's. There's a large digital instrument cluster and touchscreen, both pretty simple, and they generally work well – though the navigation has some lag and sometimes defaults to not working at all. Google Maps on my phone steps in.

The cabin layout is decent, with the rare treat of real buttons for the climate control and a fairly high-set centre console with a stubby gear selector (on automatic models), wireless smartphone charger, cupholders and deceptively spacious storage beneath the armrest. Everything you'd expect in this class, but nothing more.

There's no escaping the fact that it's built down to a price. The interior is dominated by hard plastics, which may be fine with every other Dacia, but buyers in this class expect a bit more. I'm not saying it should have a perforated full leather interior, but a little more attention paid to the finer details. It's far cheaper than most rivals, yes, but I keep coming back to the MG HS, which just looks and feels better than this Dacia for the same price.

By now we're crossing the border from France into Monaco, and with no wealth police in sight to block our way it's time to check out this bizarre microstate, where millions are as normal as thousands elsewhere. Despite the rain, there's still plenty of exotica circulating. We go through the Fairmont hairpin sandwiched between ostentatious luxury SUVs, which are two a penny here.

But the Bigster holds its own, attracting more admiring glances than you'd expect, and especially from a younger audience. I have an inkling it's because the people of Monaco know their cars and probably haven't seen a Bigster before, but also because this is by and large a smart design. It's only the slightly bulbous rear three-quarter area that I can't quite get used to.

The hybrid system feels utterly at home here, running for the majority of time on electric, with a good lick of pace from its two motors to get away from a set of lights without waking the engine. Urban driving does expose one downside of the Bigster, though, and that's the visibility out of the back. The rear window is positioned so high that smaller cars disappear behind you, which is particularly alarming when parking, though the standard-fit reversing camera helps.

Monaco is a bizarre mix of those brazen about their wealth and those who are clever about how they spend it – you see a surprising number of Dacias here. In that context the Bigster could be a clever buy, a car for those who have looked at the price of a Qashqai and realised they could get something slightly funkier for £5000 less.

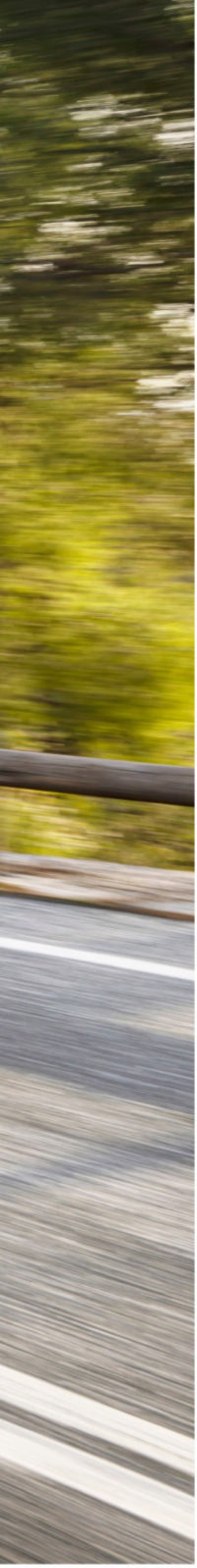
The Bigster could answer many a family's prayers for a new, more affordable and spacious family car. One which, even in top spec and with every option possible, tips the scales at barely more than £30,000. My only big reservation is if it's really a step up enough over the Duster to justify the extra expense. Dacia deliberately chose not to give the Bigster seven seats, but it seems a missed opportunity to truly set it apart.

Next month
THE HOTTEST FORD MUSTANG

The only big reservation is whether it's different enough from the Duster to justify the extra cost

Flick it into Dynamic mode and the engine goes from buttoned-up to bombastic

Sportback has barely any less luggage space than the SUV



AUDI SQ5

The philosophy of fast

Audi's extremely potent SQ5 makes us question some fundamentals

Let me share my theory about some modern performance cars. I call it the Golf R Principle, but it doesn't only apply to VW's hottest hatchback.

Here goes: certain performance cars have so much power, grip and flexibility that in order for you, the driver, to get much of a buzz you need to be pushing it as hard as you can. Anything less and it all just feels a bit too easy. As well as the Golf R and related Audi S3, I reckon the theory also holds good when applied to many current sporty electric cars and almost all performance SUVs. And, without a doubt, Audi's new SQ5.

It needs little introduction, being an evolution of an idea that's been around for more than a decade, although you might be jarred out of your complacency by checking the price: the non-S versions of the new Q5 start just below £50k, but the SQ is firmly in the 70s. It's a lofty amount of money to drop on such a car but, when you look at the competition (BMW X3 M50 or a Mercedes-AMG GLC 43) they're now similarly expensive.

For your money you get a lot of tech, including customisable OLED lights, animated ambient lighting inside, a passenger display for in-car karaoke and air suspension – a rarity at this relatively modest level of the performance SUV market.

The SQ5 and Q5 benefit from the same interior as the A5, A6 and Q6 e-Tron. A big 'digital stage' infotainment display, pared-back digital instruments, crisp graphics and a hell of a lot of gloss black are all included. Audi is, unfortunately, keeping faith with fiddly haptic buttons on the steering wheel.

What you don't get much of is a sense that the Audi Sport team have been at work in the cabin. In some ways, that makes sense; it's an S, not an RS, so is meant to go under the radar. But I'd want more than just some bespoke seats, good as they are.

Karaoke's much more fun than the haptics

At the heart of the SQ5 is a new-generation twin-turbo 3.0-litre V6, which develops 362bhp and 406lb ft. Hopefully Audi will stick to this engine; the previous SQ5 flip-flopped between petrol and diesel as Audi rolled with the tides.

Regardless of body style – SUV or sleeker Sportback – the SQ5 can sprint to 62mph in 4.5 seconds and has its top speed limited to 155mph. As well as improving your fuel economy, Audi's MHEV Plus mild-hybrid tech gives you a sweet power boost.

That engine really is the star of the show. If at times it feels like overkill, the great benefit is that it's flexible at all speeds, with plenty in reserve. Lower down, it hums quietly, and it's broadly linear in its power delivery. Flick the SQ5 into Dynamic mode, though, and that engine goes from buttoned-up to bombastic. It makes a fantastic noise – a properly tuneful V6 chorus that's backed up by pretty stonking performance for something that isn't a full-fat RS.

The ride quality is impressive, thanks to that standard-fit air suspension. Even on 21-inch wheels, it's always refined, and untroubled by large ruts.

It's so usable that you might find yourself tempted to take the mickey in order to unlock that little bit of fizz we all search for.

JAKE GROVES

First verdict

A potent, sweet-sounding and flexible engine wrapped up in a premium package. Use with caution

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

30 seconds
Odd that a sporty combustion car starts with a bong

4 minutes
Interior already feels familiar, but SQ5 has a little less gloss black – phew

25 minutes
This engine is so well behaved and smooth

41 minutes
Oh... THAT'S where all the performance is! Sounds great in Dynamic mode

54 minutes
You have to be going mega fast to get the buzz

PLUS

Fantastic engine; impressive ride quality; loads of kit

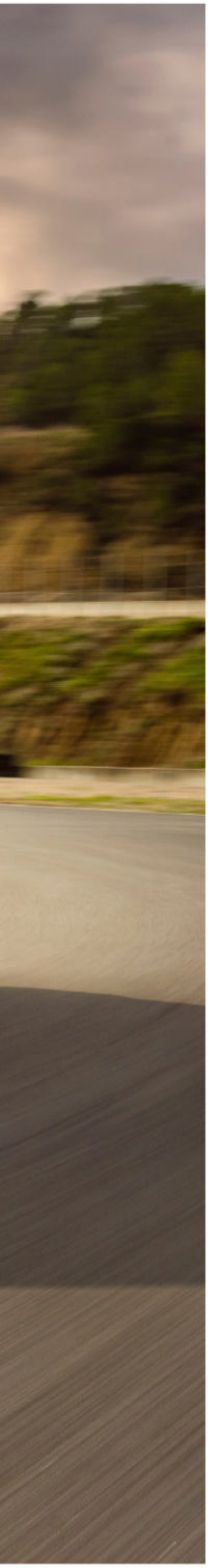
MINUS

Needs to be driven hard for it to be fun; fiddly interior

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	£74,975 (Edition 1 TFSI quattro S-tronic)	2994cc 24v twin-turbo V6, seven-speed auto, all-wheel drive	362bhp @ 5500rpm, 406lb ft @ 1700rpm, 4.5sec 0-62mph, 155mph (limited)	2040kg	34.9mpg, 185g/km CO2	Now

Despite the extra dynamism, Rolls has kept the waftability intact

Rarest of rarities: a Roller on track



ROLLS-ROYCE BLACK BADGE SPECTRE

Creature of the night

Black Badge treatment brings out the best of the electric Rolls-Royce

Barrelling down the straight of the ParcMotor Castellolí, we pick our braking point and whip the Spectre left, aiming for the apex with the Spirit of Ecstasy like an iron sight. There's a rumble, and then we're back on the power, quietly gaining speed as we hurtle uphill. This isn't how you'd typically drive a Rolls-Royce – but this is no typical Roller. Goodwood has given the electric Spectre the Black Badge treatment, and it's emerged as the most powerful Rolls-Royce ever.

It makes 659bhp, up from 576bhp, and it's less reserved about using it. There's even launch control – hold down both pedals, release the brake and it hits 60mph from zero in 4.1sec, down from 4.4sec. Range is 306-329 miles, depending on the wheels, but it's unlikely Spectre Black Badge owners will ever care. Most Spectres don't do long trips, and the power is used only in short bursts. Range and cost per mile tend not to worry Spectre owners.

As with all Black Badges, the Spectre wears a moodier bodykit. There are new colour options including Vapour Violet, and a new 23-inch wheel can be added in all black. Everything that's chrome on a regular Spectre is black chrome here. Our car is finished in Salamanca Blue with a black bonnet and roof, while the interior is bright orange.

It's powered by a 102kWh battery and a motor on each axle for all-wheel-drive, the same as any Spectre. But that's misleading, as this car makes a much bigger leap compared to other models in the transition to Black Badge tune, and the difference is most obvious on track.

Direct its long bonnet into a corner, and you'll find a night-and-day difference between this and the standard car, starting with the heavier, more precise steering. It also has a greater degree of stability: it's stoically flat at all times, with Magic Carpet ride's sorcery keeping the bonnet relatively level with the horizon.

Where the standard car is somewhat trifle-like, falling over itself as the weight transfers, the Black Badge-bewitched chassis digs in, inspiring far more confidence than a car that – from some angles – looks like the Bank of England on wheels. Heavier braking also reveals remarkably predictable pedal feel. You can feel the sheer weight of the car, but it reacts how you'd expect.

Bright is the new roomy, apparently

There's a sport mode, called Infinity mode here. You get an infinity logo on the dash along with a discotheque look to the dials. It also firms up the handling, giving a slightly heavier steering feel and accessing all the power. There's more urgency to the acceleration, too, feeling like a torquey V12.

Even if the driver's inputs become less civilised, the Rolls remains composed. The rear-wheel-steer system – a little too disjointed on the standard car – also feels far more natural here. It makes low-speed turns feel less like docking a superyacht.

But despite this extra dynamism, Rolls has kept the waftability almost entirely intact. On roads in and around Barcelona, the Black Badge had the same nonchalant attitude to bumps and cracks as the base car, floating above the road in a silent bubble.

CURTIS MOLDRICH

First verdict

If you want a Spectre (and can afford it), this is the one to get: more complete and just as comfortable as the base model
★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Rolls Royce has parked my car next to a yacht, the only thing to make it look small

15 minutes
It's a touch wide for Barcelona's streets

30 minutes
The ride feels just as cushioned as before...

50 minutes
...but this Spectre holds up significantly better when pushed

55 minutes
Infinity mode makes a real difference, without taking away any of the waft

PLUS
More stability and performance than the standard car; very similar comfort

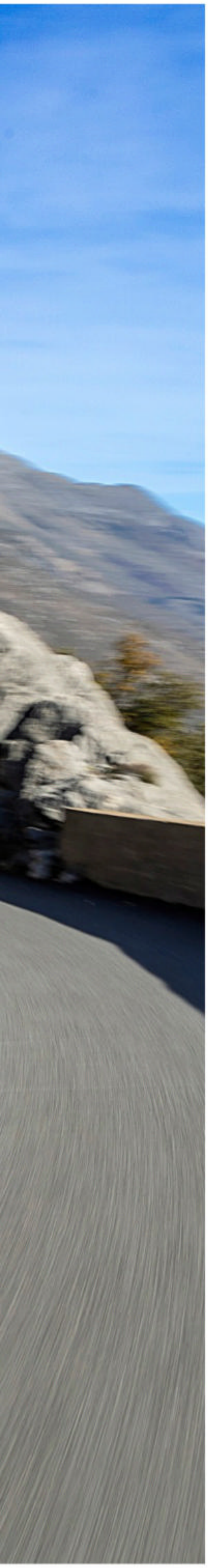
MINUS
Blacked-out look might not be for everyone

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£400,000	102kWh battery, two electric motors, all-wheel drive	659bhp, 793lb ft, 4.1sec 0-60mph, 155mph	2900kg	2.6-2.8 miles per kWh, 306-329-mile range, 0g/km CO2	Now

Another forgettable journey is a win for the Tayron

VW's worked hard on refinement. Even in the diesel you're rarely bothered by engine noise



VOLKSWAGEN TAYRON

The happy middle

Zero flair, full functionality: seven-seat SUV ticks the family box

Just when you're starting to take for granted the level of technology built in to modern cars, something will crop up to remind you that they're still fallible. Just take the new Volkswagen Tayron, which has built-in ChatGPT, a massive touchscreen, five radar sensors and a 120° camera. And yet the sat-nav voice absolutely butchers the pronunciation of Marseilles.

It's one of the few jarring things about the car, which manages to successfully channel a formula that's served VW well in the past: build a car people want, stick to the brief and play it safe. This car has few of the features that have annoyed people so much about some recent VWs; instead it's exceptionally easy to get along with, and will do what you ask of it and nothing more.

The Tayron (pronounced Tyron) sits between the Tiguan and Touareg and effectively replaces the old Tiguan Allspace. The engine range is huge, spanning old-school combustion powerplants and modern plug-in hybrids: it starts with a £39,850 mild-hybrid 1.5-litre, includes two 2.0-litre non-electrified petrols and a 2.0-litre diesel, and rounds off with two PHEVs, both of which claim to be capable of more than 70 miles of electric-only running thanks to the 19.7kWh battery.

We tried the diesel (148bhp and 266lb ft, 50.9mpg) and the higher-powered PHEV (268bhp and 295lb ft, 625mpg) and the pace of both was adequate rather than amazing.

All engine variants come with either five or seven seats, other than the PHEV as that has to sacrifice the rearmost row to cram the batteries in. The wheelbase has been stretched to 2788mm, 112mm more than the current five-seat Tiguan, with the result that room in the middle row is impressive – the seats slide fore and aft, the backs tilts, all fold flat – and the kids should be happy thanks to a couple of USB ports and an armrest that doubles as an iPad stand, similar to that in the Renault Scenic.

Seats in the third row also fold flat into the floor but are strictly for little ones. Boot space is a decent 805 litres in five-seat mode.

Quiet, comfortable and roomy in the front

My over-riding impression of the car is its sense of ease; even the touchscreen, while still not perfect, is vastly easier to use than on some VWs, with larger icons and a shortcut button to turn off the infernal lane assist. All variants come with double glazing and VW claims it's worked hard on overall refinement, to the point that it's 5dB quieter inside than its predecessor. Even in the diesel, you're rarely bothered by engine noise.

Comfort levels are high thanks to the twin-valve adaptive dampers. Developed for the likes of the Porsche Cayenne, on the Tayron they give superb control over rebound and compression. We hit a mid-corner expansion join at one point but the wheel control was such that it barely registered in the cabin. The car is on standard springs rather than air but you'd never notice. There are, bizarrely, 15 damper settings.

What is missing is any sense of engagement. But that doesn't bother me – I want my VW family cars to blend into the background and to be honest with themselves.

PIERS WARD

First verdict

Remarkably unremarkable family-friendly transport – no more, no less. Head elsewhere for thrills

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Big and dominating central screen, but with handy shortcut buttons

5 minutes
Impressively refined – even the diesel clatter is only a distant thrum

15 minutes
There are *how* many settings on the dampers?

44 minutes
Clamber into the middle seats. Huge amount of room back here

45 minutes
Clamber into the rearmost seats; very much a kid-only zone

PLUS
Effortless, comfortable and refined, with a decent amount of room

MINUS
Lifeless steering and very little dynamic appeal

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	£43,620 (TDI 150 Elegance)	1968cc 16v turbodiesel four-cyl, seven-speed DCT, front-wheel drive	148bhp, 266lb ft @ 1600rpm, 9.7sec 0-62mph, 129mph	1825kg	50.9mpg, 145g/km CO2	Now

Opinion

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Nice to be able to sing the praises of a VW again

Letter of the month

Reality bites

A refreshing outbreak of real world in the March issue, with the VW Golf R comparison test against the AMG A35 and BMW M135.

These are the kind of cars I can actually own, and they offer the sort of performance that now and again I can use on the road.

As a serial VW buyer I'm also pleased to hear that the Golf R has received the necessary improvements. Weird that it wasn't right first time, but welcome nonetheless.

Gary Edmunds

Stay in your lane

Back in the day, it seemed that the only time politicians ever became involved in automotive affairs was when they lowered a speed limit or made seatbelts compulsory for passengers, that sort of thing. But now, as your *CAR* Power List (March issue) makes clear, they seem intent on deciding what sort of cars we should drive, how much we should pay for them, where they will be made, and much else besides.

Perhaps I'm naive to think that this hasn't always been going on, but to my mind the people best qualified on those matters are engineers and designers, and perhaps climate scientists. If the politicians went back to trying to fund the health service properly and making sure the bins are emptied on time, I suspect the sum of human happiness would increase considerably.

Dave Brinkley

Category error

I'm baffled by high-performance 4x4s, such as the Land Rover Defender Octa that was the subject of the 300-Mile Test in the March issue.

My concern is not over whether one is better than another, but why they exist at all. If I want to enjoy driving on the road, something low and light would be optimal. If I need to venture off the beaten track, I want something with good ground clearance, long-travel suspension, low gears and a hose-out interior.

But if I wish to drive fast off the road, I should probably be arrested. It's not what the countryside is for.

Ian Rowlands

Logic may well be on your side, but some of these cars are remarkably good to drive, in a way that makes such objections fade into the background. CO

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No one is left behind at the Dakar Rally

All hands

There was an intriguing photo in your coverage of the Dakar Rally (March issue), showing the drivers and co-drivers of two Dacias working on one of the cars. Your story made it clear that this level of co-operation is common at the Dakar, where drivers are prepared to lose time themselves rather than leave a team-mate stranded.

Am I being fanciful, or is this close in spirit to the sort of thing that happened 100 or more years ago, when motorsport was less about lap times and more about reliability?

Technically dazzling as the latest F1 cars may be, and the drivers hugely talented, but it all feels very remote from my motoring life of potholes, speed bumps, 20mph limits, blown headlamp bulbs and sweet wrappers I can't get out of the door pockets.

Les Wilde

Hard choices

Why does anyone like cars without roofs? I just don't get it. Never have. I drove a Mazda MX-5 once and thought it was very good, but wished it had a roof. And reading your story about the Maserati and Bentley in the March issue, I just kept thinking: yes, but these cars are both also available with proper fixed roofs, so they're quieter, stiffer, the air-con works properly, you can hear the audio and you don't look like a pillock.

But clearly other people disagree. What's the appeal?

Liam Anderson

Big problems

I'm not sad to read the new large Lotus products aren't selling (Agenda, February), despite my affection for the brand as a whole. An Eletre parked in front of my Tesla Model 3 recently and my car was dwarfed in all dimensions. It's not until you see

Rivals pale into insignificance next to the Vantage

one in a typical street scene that you notice how big they are.

Despite the relative affluence of my area of Hampshire, very few are seen locally, primarily I suspect because they won't fit in our city-centre underground car park or be able to negotiate the ramp at Waitrose.

The electric Ferrari looks neatly styled (New Cars 2025, March). I do hope it's not too big, though – otherwise I won't see many of them either.

Simon Hutton

Blind ambition

I find it intriguing to hear that the DVSA, which oversees driving instructors and tests, says we should all reverse into parking bays or driveways for safety reasons.

As most cars are equipped with reversing cameras, giving a wide-angle view, surely it is better to reverse out of spaces, particularly when vans or other large SUV are parked next to you, rather than having a third of your vehicle sticking out before you get any visibility of what's coming.

What do other readers think?

Max Blount

'Most cars' have reversing cameras? Surely not. CO

Taking the hit

In the February edition of Our Cars, Ben Oliver gushes over the Skoda Enyaq Coupe vRS.

Forget the fact that is a coupe SUV, which makes as much sense as a convertible van, or that the real range falls 20 per cent short of that promised at a paltry 270 miles. The elephant in the room is that it has depreciated by £24k, or 41 per cent, in 10,000 miles and seven months.

Danyel Mills

Kettle vs Audi

I've read every *CAR* magazine since passing my test in 1974. I'll continue to read it for the quality of the writing, the illuminating industry analysis, and the photography.

However, through no fault of yours, in recent years the cars themselves have increasingly merged into minor variations on the same theme. Meanwhile, the prices of unremarkable cars have galloped to previously unthinkable levels.

The February issue carries a test of the new Audi S6. The closing sentence sums it up as 'quietly capable'. As is my kitchen kettle. One hundred grand for a car that is quietly capable?

Ken Taylor

Completely missing the point, I know, but do you really want a kettle that's quiet? CO

Pretty green

Porsche 911? Yes, but like my BMW 3-series, everyone's got one and God, it's ugly. Just look at the Aston (Giant Test, March).

Peter Tandy

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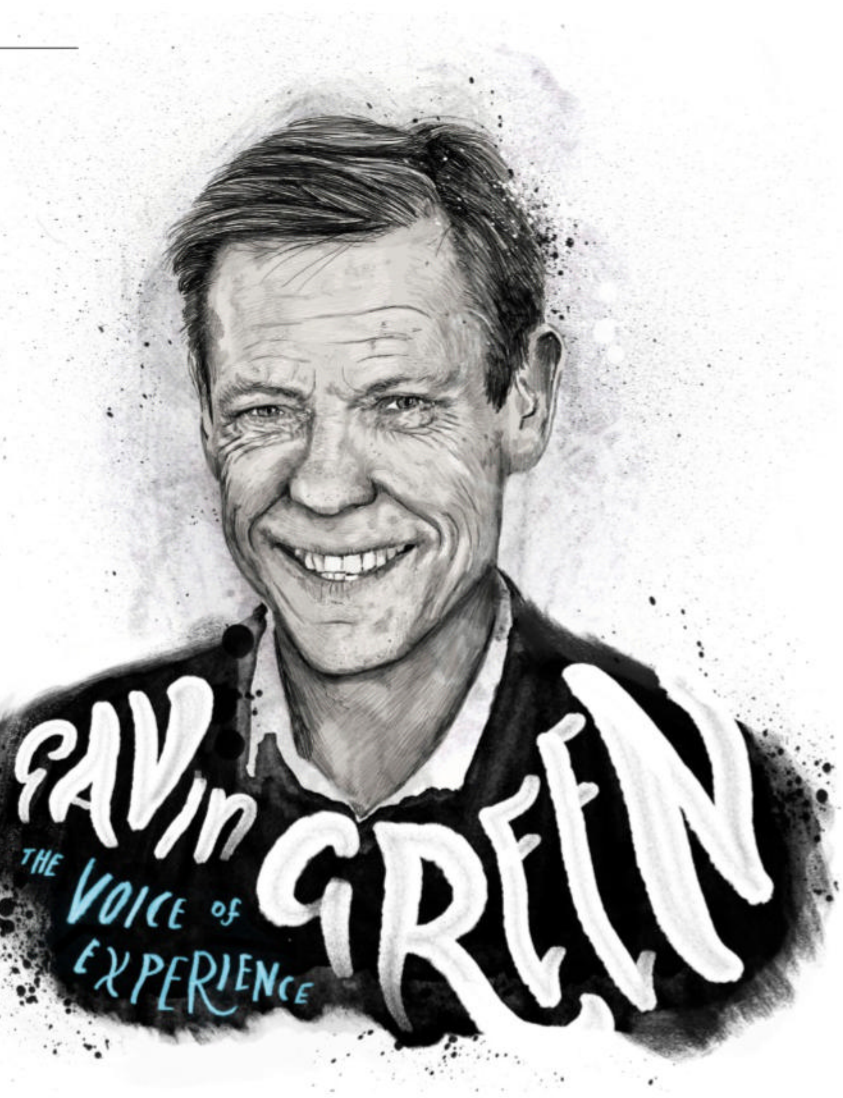
‘The Disco 3 prioritised simple, minimalist design. Every line was there for a reason’



Unlike most car journalists, I had a (small) hand in the design of an important car. That vehicle is 21 years old this month, and it deserves to be celebrated as one of the finest in the long and storied history of its maker, Land Rover.

When development of the Discovery 3 began, at the turn of the millennium, its brief was to define the future of Land Rover. The result was a vehicle of awesome off-road capability, the best that Land Rover had ever made at the time – or so said the company’s off-road guru, Roger Crathorne. Yet it was a comfortable and coveted executive car, had seven adult-sized forward-facing seats, huge carrying and towing capacity, a classy interior, and was the first actively to promote the ‘reductionist’ design that would become a welcome hallmark of Land Rover styling.

The Discovery 4 and 5 would follow, but its modern spiritual successor is the current Defender. In so many ways the latest Defender is a Disco 3 for the 2020s – tough, capable, comfortable, family friendly, chunkily styled, roomy and, crucially, it looks like a traditional Land Rover.

In 2000, I joined Land Rover as PR director, in what turned out to be a three-year hiatus from *CAR*. I sat on its management board and, even more enjoyably, its product committee, which oversaw all new model proposals. Two significant new cars were presented in my time: the Discovery 3 and first Range Rover Sport. Many vehicle upgrades were also discussed, from facelifts to engineering improvements, including Ford- and Jaguar-sourced engines for the big Range Rover to replace the pricey BMW motors.

I never cared for the first Range Rover Sport, although it would become a significant sales and commercial success. But when I first saw design director Geoff Upex’s vision for ‘the future of Land Rover’, I thought it design genius.

The Discovery 3 that Upex presented was created by exterior designer Andy Wheel. He prioritised simple, minimalist, timeless design – true form follows function. Every line and piece of furniture was there for a reason. It was a car pleasingly free from jewellery and embellishment, for the simple reason that no embroidery was necessary or desirable. Clever touches included the distinctive asymmetric rear tailgate: it helped rear visibility and made reaching into the boot easier, especially for shorter people.

It was a polarising design, as ambitious design often is. Some members of the product committee disliked it. But I championed its minimalism and intelligence, and when the design was approved, virtually without change, Upex thanked me for my support. I helped preserve the purity of the Upex and Wheel design. It was hardly a major creative contribution – but, I like to think, still significant.

I had left Land Rover, returning to *CAR*, by the time the Discovery 3 was publicly unveiled at the 2004 New York Auto Show.

It won great critical praise and sold very well. In its facelifted, shinier and mechanically improved Discovery 4 guise it kept selling well, right up until it was replaced by the fifth-generation Discovery in 2017. That’s the virtue of intelligent and timeless design.

It certainly had its faults. In particular, the ladder-frame T5 platform – part of an unusual ‘Integrated Body Frame’ that included a bolted-on monocoque for the passenger compartment – made it too heavy (but very strong). Sophisticated fully independent suspension and some brawny V8 petrol and V6 diesel engines partly compensated. It seems strange that the only car I had any hand in creating should be overweight, when as a journalist I’ve spent decades championing small, nimble, intelligently designed cars. (Looking around me, it clearly hasn’t worked.)

Nowadays I often see Disco 3s on the road, invariably well used and enjoying a hard life – like any good working vehicle. And I still get a small thrill to think of my own modest contribution to a British motoring great.

Former *CAR* editor and brief visitor to the dark side Gavin Green is now one of the world’s foremost automotive commentators

Peter Strain

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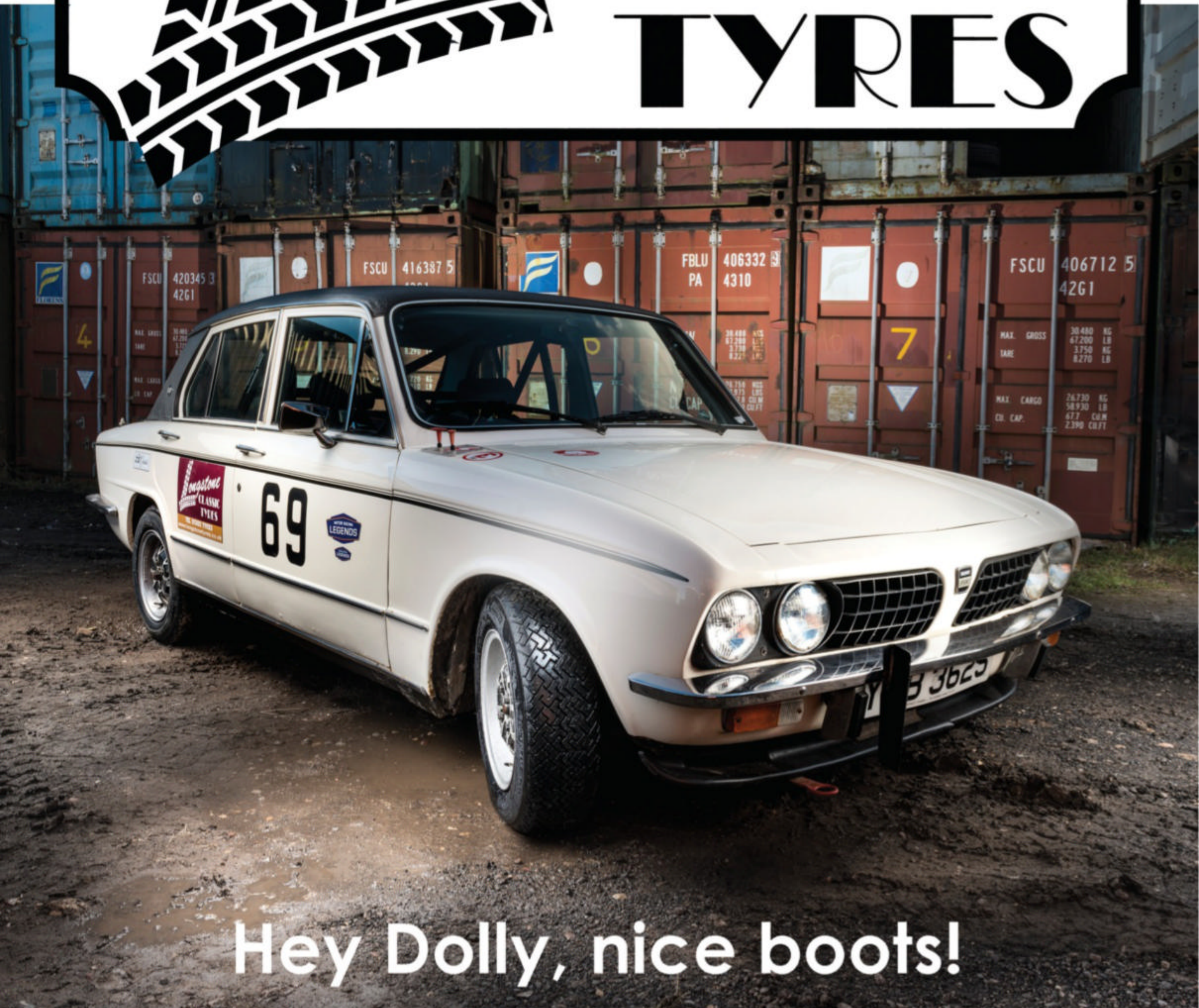
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Hey Dolly, nice boots!
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‘The new Tahoe is positively Trumpian, a colossal statement of confidence and excess’

MARK
WALTON
THE INCURABLE
ENTHUSIAST

The man at the rental shop in Los Angeles airport, making small talk, asks: ‘How many are travelling with you today?’

‘Just me,’ I reply.

‘Oh!’ he says, as though something’s gone wrong. ‘Er, you realise you’ve booked a Chevy Tahoe?’ Long pause. ‘It’s like big enough for nine people,’ he adds, to clarify.

‘Oh yes, I know,’ I reassure him, breezily. ‘Just want to, you know, “live the American dream” ha ha!’

This mega-Chevy isn’t just ‘American’ in its gargantuan size. The new Tahoe is positively Trumpian, a colossal statement of confidence and excess, a symbol of the country’s distinctly unapologetic, ‘screw-you’ attitude in 2025. At 5.3 metres long, over two metres wide, and 1.95 metres tall the Tahoe is a behemoth – a civilised, showroom monster truck with a vertical nose taller than Washington’s forehead at Mount Rushmore.

The rental company’s Premier edition has a 5.3-litre V8 and a 10-speed automatic driving all four wheels. Inside, the driver and front passenger are separated by a glovebox so wide it’s like you’re sitting each side of a dishwasher. In the back you can practically stand up and walk around like you’re in a camper van. It’s huge, it’s magnificent, and on the boulevards of South Bay LA it’s perfect.

You have to understand, the Tahoe has simply adapted to its environment. The lanes are wide here, the parking spaces generous and the turns all follow broad, gentle arcs. And it’s here, while cruising around and thinking about Darwin and habitat, that it suddenly strikes me. I reckon the entire genus of American automobiles actually evolved thanks to one thing: the four-way stop.

Even if you’ve never been to the US, you’ll know the four-way stop from the movies – it’s a crossroads where each approaching car has to stop at the line. It’s a first-come-first-served system – any car that stops before you has the right of way, and when you’ve stopped momentarily and you see all the other cars still moving, it’s your turn.

The origin of this kind of junction is lost in history, but the first proper stop signs were introduced in Detroit in 1914. That’s very close to the introduction of the first roundabout in the UK, built in Letchworth Garden City in 1909. Two habitats were created, and over a century later you can still feel that the Tahoe is the result of that early branching of the ‘phylogenetic tree’.

So back in LA, I roll up to the four-way stop gently and easily, one hand on the wheel, one elbow resting on the dishwasher. I check all directions using the panoramic views from my giant, air-conditioned watch tower. When it’s my turn, I squeeze the accelerator and the Tahoe growls mildly and pulses forward with a feeling of effortless muscle. The V8 barely gets above tickover as I drift from junction to junction. In this languid, stop-start, straight-line environment, the Tahoe feels undemanding and luxurious – as convenient as a drive-through drugstore, extrapolated to an entire city. Instead of excessive, it feels like exactly what I need.

I briefly imagine a Tahoe in the UK. Tackling a roundabout would be like doing an emergency swerve in a top-heavy cruise ship. It would feel bloated and heavy and softly sprung. Equally, a Mini or Ford Puma transported to LA would feel small and strained on these junctions. The four-way stops are often combined with brutal concrete gulleys, designed to drain the streets after heavy rains – though usually they’re bleached white under the California sun. You have to bounce over these channels as you cross the junction, the road scored either side with all the front bumpers that have scraped their paint as they bottom out. You fear a small European hatchback would snap in half, but the Tahoe lumbers over them.

So yes, if I moved to LA you’re damn right I’d buy a Chevy Tahoe. It’s a lot of car for the money – £60k for the Premier edition, £10k-£20k less than a Land Rover Disco 5 in the equivalent spec. And as Donald Trump once said, ‘You have to think anyway – so why not think big?’

You’ll be reassured to learn that *CAR* editor-at-large Mark Walton returned to his senses on the flight back from LA

Peter Strain

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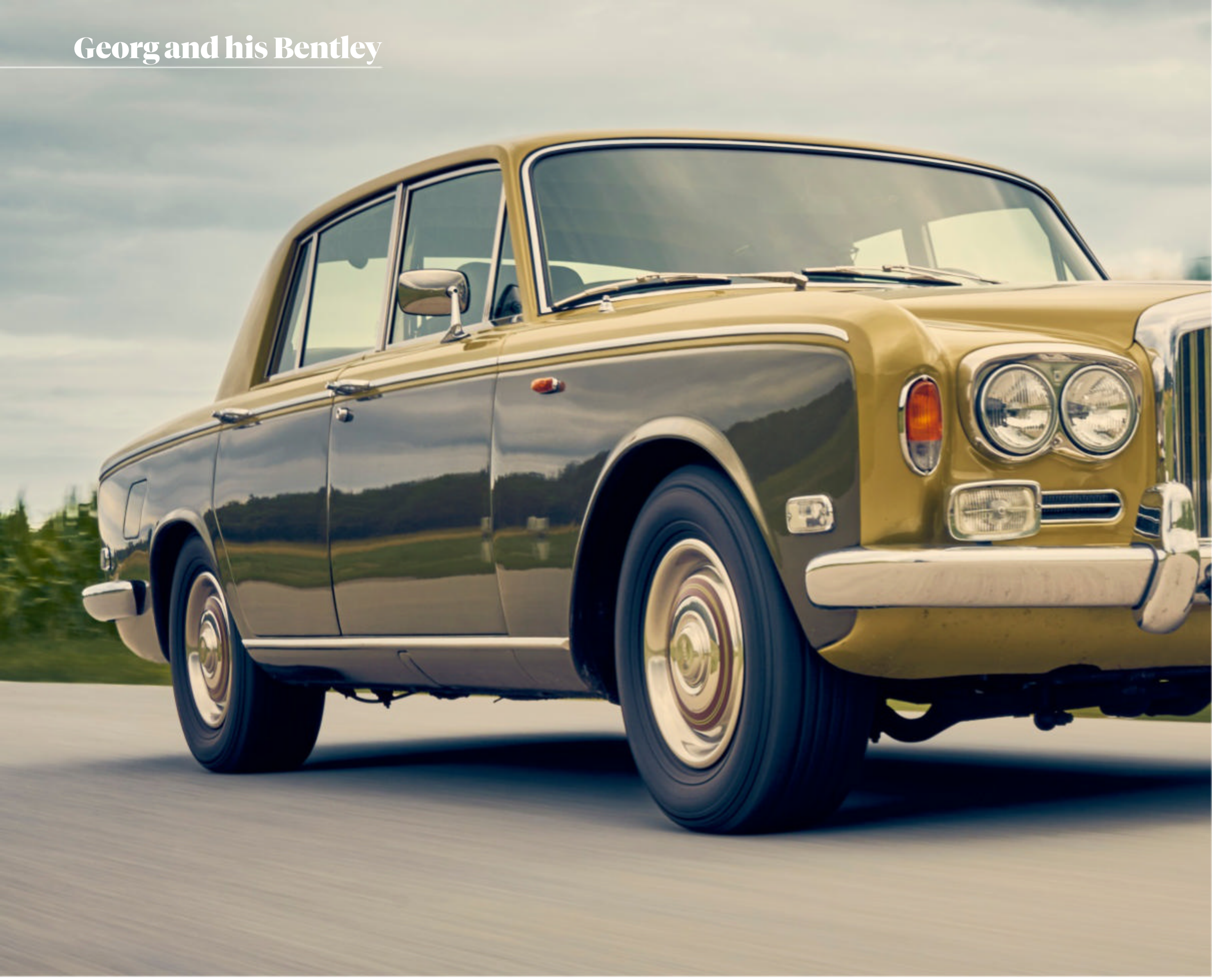
ONE IN A MILLION

CAR's European editor has straddled the industry like a colossus for half a century. He could own virtually anything. So how did this old Bentley steal his heart?

Words Georg Kacher **Photography** Steffen Jahn



You don't have to look far

Growing old is inevitable. Growing up is optional. Need proof? Look no further than my early-'70s Bentley T1.

It was love at first sight. Not everyone's reaction, it's fair to say. A near-vintage Bentley saloon painted in dark Moss Green over bright Willow Gold metallic violated the concours conventions to such an extent that various petrolhead peers in the Munich area were downright hostile. But I loved it, instantly. Kitted out in supple Dark Pine leather, with finest burr walnut and adorned with plenty of solid chrome inside and out, to me this particular T1 is a true gatefold beauty worthy of a golden staple in the belly button.

This being 2013, our first meeting wasn't online but old-fashioned, analogue and touchy-feely. Six photos plus a lengthy lyrical description presented on a single page of a glossy Dorotheum auction catalogue was all it took to set my heart aflutter.

At the time we were holidaying in Italy, so I asked a more handily located friend to travel to Salzburg to inspect the Austrian-registered object of desire, which he duly vouched to be in splendid nick cosmetically and mechanically. After my third negroni, a couple of frantic phone calls and an all-night internet session browsing various relevant forums, I put in a cautious bid worth half a bottle of house wine above the low estimate. A mere 48 hours later, sight unseen, it was mine, and on a flat-bed heading for Munich.

Reckless? Firing from the hip like this would normally be a big risk, but I told myself the money at stake would have struggled to buy a

It's Moss Green over Willow Gold metallic

'Contentedness', 2025, digital file on memory card

In 1980, the T2 was replaced by a bunch of somewhat more advanced flying Bs – cars that proved instantly popular, but which I found quite a bit harder to love. With the honourable exception of the Turbo R/T and the Continental S and T, the cars being produced in Crewe under Vickers ownership were temperamental olde worlde cathedrals on wheels featuring four vanity mirrors, two picnic tables and a full set of reading lights even before Mr Mulliner introduced his personalisation services.

Unfortunately the sweeping heavyweights drove like luxury trucklets and cost a fortune to maintain. Mulsanne and Eight served as envy-breeding, vandalism-prone status symbols, whereas the members of the Turbo family were at least quick enough to pull away swiftly from the lower ranks.

Out of that horror cabinet of antiquated, under-engineered land yachts there was one particularly crass and socially unacceptable specimen I simply had to have, cost what it may, and that was the original Azure, co-produced with Pininfarina. Mine was a 2000 car in solid black with autumn leather and the upgraded 400bhp-plus engine (but without tacky Le Mans side vents and flash Rodeo Drive chrome rims).

As far as I was concerned it was an absolute beauty, and far more appealing than the small downtown bedsit or year-long vacation in the Maldives I suppose I could have spent the money on instead. True, it made the neighbours hate us, and my wife wouldn't be seen dead in it. But Tessa the beloved Bavarian mountain hound resided proudly in the passenger seat, nose high into the wind and ears flapping, with Haydn's opera *Armida* roaring out and the 6750cc motor unleashing a feisty 590lb ft at a hushed 2000rpm.

Next, when wiser guys would have bought that city flat or invested in the stock market, I fell for another Azure, this time one of the first 2006 models, still with the sluggish four-speed transmission, but very chic in its dark blue livery, cream interior and period light wood. It was a much better car than the Mk1, no doubt about that: dynamically superior thanks to newly acquired VW know-how and the funds of the Volkswagen Group, which had acquired Bentley in 1998 while BMW had to make do with Rolls-Royce. ▶

After my third negroni, a couple of frantic phone calls and an all-night internet session browsing various forums, I put in a cautious bid

10-year-old VW Golf GTI, so what the heck.

For many years I'd harboured the notion that Bentleys were more appealing than Rolls-Royces, which at the time were closely related. This was towards the end of the 'gentle giant' phase, when three consecutive generations of S-series cars in the '50s and '60s just seemed to hit the spot in the way the Rolls equivalents did not.

The T1 saloon, coupe and convertible that followed attracted an equally affluent but more introvert crowd – people who preferred to wear fur as a lining, not a statement. Mellowed by a five per cent stealth content over the Rolls line-up, the alternative aristocrats were my new dream cars: all the splendour on a less ostentatious footprint, exquisite interiors, goosebump waftability, ample performance and legendary refinement – it was all there in abundance.

About half a century later, the car my wife has nicknamed Mr Toad for its colour scheme received historic H plates and became part of the family. But it wasn't my first Bentley. Its three predecessors all deserve a special mention as well as reserved parking spaces in memory lane.

Frida became the new Tessa, and the fox-red lab also loved to share the front-row lookout with her hatted keeper. The rest of the family were, however, unconvinced. Eventually, a few years later, I made peace with them by trading in the extrovert Azure for an early Continental GTC Supersports, which went like stink, handled like a proper sports car and was kitted out to perfection with Bugatti Veyron seats and carbon-ceramic brakes.

We eventually sold the Conti too, but it turned out that life without a Bentley was a bit like life without a dog. Hence the two-tone T1 acquired in 2013, which felt right, but took some adjusting to since it was from an earlier, pre-VW era.

There have been many other Bentleys over the five decades, some of which I may have liked the idea of owning… others not so much. The wide-body Corniche was a charming piece of kit, the last-of-line turbocharged Corniche soft-tops were instant collectibles, and even the fatboy Turbo R somehow still captured that irresistible and enthralling pre-war sporting spirit.

If there is a thread that ties my charming T1 to Bentley's current power-and-glory model range, it's the sublime craftsmanship which has been the brand's core virtue for decades

But the most interesting time was the period between 1998 and 2003, when the ex-Audi CEO Franz-Josef Paefgen and his CTO Uli Eichhorn made the ageing rear-wheel-drive platform fit for the second-generation Azure, the Brooklands coupe and gen-two Mulsanne while simultaneously preparing Crewe for a brighter future with the VW Phaeton-based Continental GT/GTC and Flying Spur.

The marque's charm then nosedived in 2015 with the arrival of the unpretty yet hugely successful Bentayga. The ostentatious period it initiated continues to this day with the hot-selling, in-your-face Conti GT and the Flying Spur, which looks rich and ritzy but does not ride as well as a Mercedes S-Class. Resale values also drop fast.

But I digress. If there is a thread that ties the charming T1 to the current power-and-glory model range, it's the sublime craftsmanship which has been the brand's core virtue for decades. Although the car which started life in the UK as VBY 289L now wears its second coat of paint (its woodwork, too, has been refurbished), the original Connolly leather wears its age amazingly well, and the engine, gearbox and chassis are also largely untouched since Mr Toad first saw the light of day exactly 61,188 miles ago. It gets an MoT check-up every other year, and has passed the last five inspections without difficulty. Yes, there are a few oily spots between engine and transmission, around the differential and on parts of the rear suspension.

That said, over the years it's had a fair bit of money spent on regular maintenance and running repairs. The brake calipers needed rebuilding and new discs and pads were fitted, along with fresh cut-to-size front brake lines. The air-con has needed refilling at three-year intervals, the exhaust manifold gaskets needed replacing, the rear central locking system and one window winder were infested with stubborn electric bugs, the sagging self-levelling rear end received new adjustment valves twice, a broken speedometer cable was replaced, and we also renewed just about every rubber bushing, mount, bearing and seal.

At an authorised Bentley dealer, this treatment would have cost a

SMITHS
KPH
MPH
AMPS
MAIN BEAM
B

Timber. Smiths instruments. *That* smell

There are no words

small fortune, but Jo Appl's specialist workshop in Halfing near Rosenheim did a fantastic job at mate's rates. We agreed he should leave the gigantic old car phone and massive amplifier squatting side by side in the boot, untouched.

The bodywork was in good condition when Mr Toad joined us. But after a couple of years the corroding upper parts of all four doors needed a respray, and last year the small rust bubble which had blossomed on the nearside front wing begged for some filler, primer and paint. I've always shied away from a close inspection of the car's Waxoyl anti-rust-treated underside. The odd dark flake of a material previously known as metal has been shed, but the MoT man is happy they're not from structurally critical areas.

Fresh blemishes include a couple of hairline cracks on the cowl where steel and alloy meet. The chrome is now beginning to pit on the bumpers. The aftermarket foglamps and the tinted windscreen show small signs of de-lamination. The electric Kienzle clock has always taken the scenic route, ever since the car's purchase in July 2013, initially dropping about an hour per day. Eleven years later, one lap of the small hand equals a week and a bit. The gauge indicating the fuel level in the cavernous 100-litre tank does work, but needs tapping after every restart to make it jump into life.

Unlike the hostility attracted by the Azures, Mr Toad seems to have nothing but fans and admirers. A similar level of affection ▶

The flying G and his flying B

With that view it's a wonder he gets any work done

50 NOT OUT: GEORG AND *CAR*

Half a century in, the wild ride continues

Flash back 50 years to 1975. *CAR* was privately owned, the editor was Mel Nichols, and the team of five was headquarted next to Smithfield meat market. One day in July of that year, an office fire demolished half the typewritten manuscripts exactly one week before the mag was due to go to press. The morning after, 'a big dark shadow filled the frame of my office door', Mel would later recall. 'It was Kacher, who had applied for a job twice before but was denied it for lack of journalistic training.'

In the wake of that fire, however, they needed copy more badly than they needed a qualification; a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me. Six weeks later, my first story – a travelogue about driving a used Peugeot 504 from Munich to Tehran and selling it there – appeared in the October issue. Going strong 50 years on, the career that started a stone's throw from the Hand & Shears pub turned out to be a dream come true.

In that time *CAR*'s been arguably both the world's best motoring magazine and the most influential. Breaking news and early drives were key, and being based in Germany I could get my hands on Audis, BMWs, Mercedes and Porsches long before the competition.

Connections are everything. I conducted the first Porsche 959 versus Ferrari F40 comparison test (part of it on the Fiorano test track) and tapped unofficial channels to jump the queue for every new BMW and Porsche. I milked my contacts 24/7 for information on cars not yet in the public domain, working with fearless designer friends, visionary engineers and outspoken CEOs like the unforgotten Sergio Marchionne to compile countless early scoops and prototype drives.

But the best part of this job was – and still is – the chance to live life in the fastest of fast lanes. Highlights? That 226mph autobahn stint in a Bugatti Chiro, the Mille Miglia and the Carrera Panamericana in a Mercedes 300 SL and some amazing GT Porsches, from the scalpel-sharp 1997 GT1 widowmaker to the awesome 700bhp GT2 RS.

Am I done? Not yet. Truth is there's just too much going on, from battery breakthroughs to the European car makers' brand-centric fight for survival. It's a lot to digest on the eve of one's 73th birthday. But while I'm still full of curiosity and hungry for knowledge, I have no intention of calling it a day.

GEORG KACHER

Ride quality eclipses that of the latest Flying Spur. On 15-inch Avon Turbosteels the vintage 2120kg saloon irons out obstacles like a hovercraft – only without the noise

attaches itself to my Yugo 45L. Whereas many Rolls-Royces of similar age become wedding chariots, our T1 was the family's designated family-fun transport – until, that is, a 2016 BMW 640i convertible arrived recently. It quickly became the dog's new number one, especially with the top down and the snout high up in the wind.

The T1 has covered 10,000 miles in our ownership. The longest journeys were excursions to the Salzburgring in spring and summer; the shortest were weekend hops within the local lake district.

Neither son ever warmed to the Bentley. I guess that makes sense when your daily driver is a Porsche 911 or BMW M3 Touring. They've never actually put a foot inside the plush two-tone carriage, and if they had they may well have been underwhelmed by the driving experience: sedate engine, vague steering, billowing chassis, tardy transmission, casual brakes, token cornering grip. No thanks, Dad.

From my perspective, in certain respects the ancient T1 even eclipses the very latest Flying Spur. Ride comfort for one. Wearing 235/70 HR15 Avon Turbosteels, the vintage 2120kg saloon irons out obstacles like a hovercraft, only without the noise. I cannot think of a modern car which feels as cushy over challenging terrain as this stately saloon. Potholes are smoothed out, transverse irritations recede into the ground as if by magic and unilateral undulations are neutralised by a mix of eiderdown shocks and super-comfy seats.

The heavily assisted recirculating-ball steering is admittedly more approximate than accurate. The play granted by the thin-rimmed two-spoke black bakelite wheel measures about two palms in either direction, and the response is provocatively relaxed. Like an early 911 Turbo, the T1 is curse, challenge and contentment all in one. But in both case, once you've mastered the quirks they're richly rewarding.

The Bentley is nose-heavy, softly sprung and fitted with spindly and twisted anti-roll bars, so cornering involves a lot of understeer, lateral grip is lackadaisical, and traction in the wet can involve some unwelcome surprises. On the credit side, one can only applaud the commendably tight turning circle, the effective yet frighteningly complicated triple-circuit brakes and the trick rear suspension, fed by a Citroën-style camshaft-driven central hydraulic system.

What were the options 11 years ago when that spare cash was burning a hole in my trouser pocket? I briefly considered the Rover P5 coupe but couldn't find a suitable left-hooker. A similar problem ▶

It'll waft 0-60mph in about 11sec

ruled out the Bristol 408. At the time, I also owned a Porsche 968 CS, a Lancia Kappa coupe and an Audi Coupe S, so buying a sports car wasn't my priority. Having previously possessed an Ami 6, a DS21 and an SM (a keeper for almost 15 years), a very early chrome-less pre-Pallas Citroën CX would have made a compelling substitute. But again, no luck – all the market had to offer were GTI and Prestige models. A low-mileage manual Audi S8 MkI was sold under my nose to a higher bidder, a pristine Lancia Thesis was ultimately too quirky even for me, and a Buick Grand National popped up only to be dismissed again for its third-world handling. Next in line were a bunch of interesting coupes. The list stretched from the way too expensive Facel Vega HK500 over the Jensen Interceptor I and the Alfa 2600 Sprint to the Fiat 2300S Abarth, Volvo 780 by Bertone, Renault 17TS with fabric sunroof, Mercedes 250SE W111 and Fiat 130.

I also wondered about a different Bentley. A pre-facelift gen-two Mulsanne would have been the perfect piece of driveway furniture. It's extremely yet tastefully plush inside, cosmetically not as OTT as the post-facelift version, effortless thanks to the twin-turbo 506bhp, 752lb ft V8, a much better drive than the compromised Arnage and a true gem in terms of craftsmanship and build quality. But it's also two sizes bigger than the T1, ostentatious, vastly more expensive to buy and to run, in many ways even more a thing of the past than its slimmer, non-catalyst predecessor.

I also wondered about a Brooklands coupe, that epitome of elegance and period splendour. I don't need the fancy extra-cost brakes, but a darker colour with a matching interior would be nice to have. Trouble is, I would have to sell my T1 five times over to afford one.

In any case, Mr Toad is no slouch, thanks to the legendary 6750cc V8, type-approved in Germany at 193bhp. The brochure described the peak power output nonchalantly as 'adequate', and didn't even quantify the maximum twist action of 406lb ft, available from 2500rpm. Mated to a three-speed auto that struggles with take-off and upshift torque slip like a tipsy juggler, the cam-in-block two-valver accelerates the majestic five-seater 0-60mph in around 11 seconds. The advertised top speed is 118mph. This one rarely exceeds 100mph because doing so would drive up the petrol and oil consumption along with the owner's fears of a costly breakdown.

We are currently running a very mixed bag of six cars: the T1, a Mini Countryman PHEV firmly in the hands of Mrs Kacher (and Pucki the former Roman street dog, new to the team), the 1972 Barolo red 2002tii (which has featured in *CAR*), the aforementioned Yugo 45L (ditto) and 6-series, plus a BMW X5 M60i for the winter on a short-term lease.

The Bentley would have to go if I were to get another car – there simply isn't room. If it's a modern collectible, it could be a base Alpine A110 GT. Or a Ferrari 599 GTB. Or an Alpina D5 Touring. If it's a classic, it better be a zero-depreciation investment like Mr Toad, who has been a cost-neutral boarder even with all the repair and running expenses factored in. But what else could generate anything like the same feelgood factor? I'm really struggling. **car**

BENTLEY T1

PRICE £35,000 (1973)
VALUE NOW £40,000
POWERTRAIN 6750cc 16v V8, three-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 193bhp @ 4000rpm, 406lb ft @ 2500rpm, 10.9sec 0-60mph, 118mph
WEIGHT 2103kg
EFFICIENCY 10-12mpg

car
New Pa
vs Renau
50 YEARS
UP CLOSE WIT
NEW CAR 2025
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Any regrets, Lewis?
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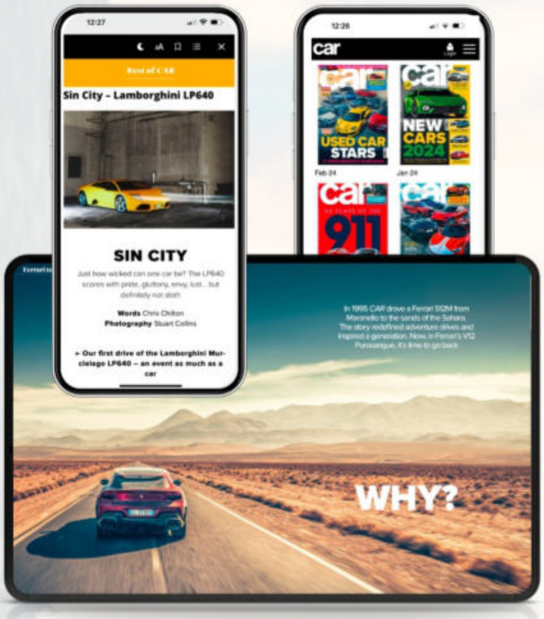
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THE ROME THAT STROLL BUILT

Aston Martin is gearing up to conquer F1's next era. Step inside the £200 million facility it calls home

Words Ben Miller **Photography** Olgun Kordal & AMF1

Andy Cowell knows what it takes to become a winning team – and stay there

Welcome to the most recently completed of the three sleek buildings that comprise the Aston Martin Formula One Team campus. More secretive than the other two, it's furthest from prying eyes and has fewer windows. And it's called Building Three. Clearly when you're spending hundreds of millions, chasing tenths and laying the foundations for a trophy-laden dynasty, there's no time to sit around brainstorming cute building names.

Deep in Building Three's bowels, the ambience is more outer space than just outside Silverstone. In the gloom, certainly when you walk here directly from the bright-as-day build bays, rows of expensive machines hum as they work. They're printing resin parts for 60 per cent wind tunnel models. Since the process is like building a full-sized skyscraper in Lego, one tiny layer at a time, it is not fast. The display on one indicates it'll be finished some time tomorrow. Others, their windows flashing a ghoulish green, are printing elaborate parts in aluminium and titanium. AMF1 is more than a customer for these machines. Its competitive hunger puts it at the vanguard of the technology – along with NASA. After all, why burn fuel taking a set of spanners into space when you can print the one you need up there?

Also in Building Three, the new wind tunnel has just passed its final checks. Previously, the team used Mercedes-AMG's tunnel when Mercedes-AMG weren't (so, evenings and weekends) and wore grooves in a nine-mile stretch of the A43 as a consequence. Elsewhere on the campus, the greatest car designer the sport has ever seen, Adrian Newey, stands at the world's most famous drawing board. After 18 riotously successful years with Red Bull, he started at Aston in March. His office – a glass beacon of experience and creativity in a sea of CAD monitors and furrowed brows – feels as much a display case for this talismanic hire as a place of work.

Next door, in Building Two, there's another state-of-the-art piece of equipment, AMF1's new driver-in-the-loop simulator (as opposed to a simulator without a driver, which is also a thing). Unseen servers run warm as Aston engineers collaborate with those of Honda Motor Company and HRC half a world away. The Japanese company, creator of some of the finest and fiercest engines the sport has ever seen, will be AMF1's powertrain partner for the sport's new-regulation era, arriving 2026. And outside, amid beautiful planting and grasses that sway in the stiff spring breeze, there's a helipad – a helipad that, once a week, receives the man driving this revolution. Welcome to the Aston Martin Formula One Team, the Rome that Lawrence Stroll built. ▶

The greatest car designer the sport has ever seen stands at the world's most famous drawing board

Looks deserted here but the head count's now around 1000

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MAADEN
ASTON MARTIN
18
servicenow
Valvoline

It's not really about 2025, though Aston's working to increase the effectiveness of its upgrades

Amid beautiful planting there's a helipad – a helipad that, once a week, receives the man driving this revolution

Organisations often talk about being more than the sum of their parts. As of right now, if this team were anything like the sum of its parts it'd win every race it entered. Its facilities are, by virtue of being the newest, arguably the best in the sport. Its recent hires read like an F1 super group, from the aforementioned Newey through ex-Ferrari aerodynamics man Enrico Cardile to former Mercedes-AMG powertrain guru Andy Cowell, who joined as group CEO and was recently appointed team principal too. Its title sponsor Aramco, Saudi Arabia's majority state-owned gas and oil company, isn't short of funds. And on the power unit side, Honda will replace current supplier Mercedes-AMG for 2026. Honda engines have won the last four drivers' championships and two of the last three constructors' titles.

This team, which started life as plucky underdogs Jordan more than 35 years ago, stands poised to dominate a sport transformed out of all recognition – a sport that's gone from Ecclestone's personal plaything to conquering Netflix, hijacking the global news agenda on Premier League transfer deadline day (Lewis Hamilton to Ferrari!) and making the teams that contest it wealthier in the process. If AMF1 can become serial winners it'll be the result of an acquisition of excellence so clear-eyed and uncompromising it'd make Pep Guardiola blush. And if it happens it'll be because Andy Cowell and the rest of the senior team managed to tune this engine of a thousand people and an awful lot of raw talent into a winning machine.

'You can't point to a single aspect of what we're doing here as pivotal, and that's the whole point,' Cowell tells *CAR*. 'It's a union of all of these things, and it stems from Lawrence's vision for the team.'

Billionaire businessman Lawrence Stroll headed up a consortium that bought Force India's assets in 2018, re-branding the team first as Racing Point and then Aston Martin when another Stroll-led consortium acquired a controlling interest in the car company in 2020.

'He came in and said, "I want this team to win. I want this team to get to the front." And he's taken the time to speak to people and understand what's required. So, the wind tunnel. The driver-in-the loop simulator. A significantly bigger factory. Works team status, a partnership with Honda and developing our own transmission. [Because F1 gearboxes are fundamental to both the car's aerodynamics and its rear suspension layout, designing your own is seen as essential for a works team with title aspirations.] Bringing together a larger group of people as we transition from surviving customer team to works entity, in which we create everything ourselves. It's all here. Now it's about bringing it all together efficiently and effectively.'

Cowell was a part of Mercedes as it geared up to dominate F1's first V6 hybrid era, which started with the 2014 season. Does being a part of this team now feel anything like being a part of Mercedes-AMG then? Is there a familiarity to this calm before the storm of champagne and championship wins?

'It comes down to the vision. At Mercedes that was "the best or nothing" – that was our approach,' he says. 'It took a few years to embed, but you could see that by the middle of 2013 [when Cowell was managing director of Mercedes-AMG High Performance Powertrains] Mercedes were capable of winning races. The new power unit [in 2014] provided a step, as did the aero changes that came with it. Then there was just a determination to stay there – that even though we were at the front, we wanted to keep winning.

'Here the job is to instil the same focus. If our performance improvement over time is greater than our opponents, we'll overtake them. And if we can keep our gradient of improvement over time greater than our opponents, we'll stay ahead of them. For every department, whether it's communications or HR or vehicle dynamics ▶

HOW NOT TO SPEND IT: TOYOTA IN F1

Sport, fortunately, is about more than just throwing money at the problem – just ask Toyota. The Japanese giant arrived in F1 in 2002, stuck around for eight seasons and failed to win a single race, let alone a title. The return on its monumental investment amounted to three poles and a handful of podiums.

So, what went wrong – and how is ambitious Aston avoiding the pitfalls that sunk Toyota? For one, the target at which Cowell and his crew are aiming is relatively static. The new 2026 regulations are still being fine-tuned (much to everyone's frustration) but only in detail, and all the teams are in the same boat. Toyota got off to a stuttering start by initially developing a V12 engine the rules then outlawed, requiring the team to hurriedly create a new V10. Toyota also underestimated the manpower required, made some odd hires initially (too many were winners in other disciplines but had little to no F1 experience), insisted on basing the team in Cologne rather than the UK (making hiring more difficult), quickly got into the corrosive habit of blaming its lack of pace on its drivers and saddled the team with an unwieldy corporate approach that mired it in bureaucracy and made it slow to respond.

Panasonic
TOYOTA

Many of Aston's senior people were in the sport when Toyota foundered, watching on from the likes of Red Bull and Mercedes. Certainly Aston Martin's approach – ruthlessly logical, built on experienced people and based within earshot of Silverstone – couldn't be more different.

Getty Images/Darren Heath

or aerodynamics, it's about an obsessive approach to improvement, and how quickly we can go from today's situation to what we've defined as a great place to be in a controlled way.'

Winning is not something this team, in its various guises, has done much of. As Aston it has scored podiums but remains without a race victory, let alone a title. Its most successful eras were arguably as Racing Point, when Sergio Perez won the 2020 Sakhir Grand Prix, and as Jordan, when the late Eddie Jordan oversaw semi-regular flirtations with front-running – and even title-chasing – pace.

For those who remember the name Jordan above the door (not to mention Force India, Spyker and the rest), the Stroll era feels like a very pleasant dream from which they'd really rather not wake up.

'The old days were a lot of fun, no doubt about it,' says Mark Gray, head of build and car assembly. 'There were fewer races in the season but if anything we were away more. I did 18 years trackside, having joined in 2003, but what's happening now is really exciting. Technically the cars today are incredible and Lawrence's investment – this era – feels different. Previous owners had similar ambitions but they weren't necessarily realistic. Lawrence's approach has been: "What do you need?" For us it almost required a mindset shift. No one had ever asked us that before because we didn't have the money. Suddenly it's like, "Right, what do we need?" And what you see here is the result of that: the autoclave and five-axis CNC milling big enough to accommodate a full chassis [before the £1.2 million investment in the bathroom-sized CNC machine, the team had to out-source the job] and the wind tunnel. And he cares. He's here every week and he hates it when we don't do well. But he's realistic too. He knows success doesn't come overnight.'

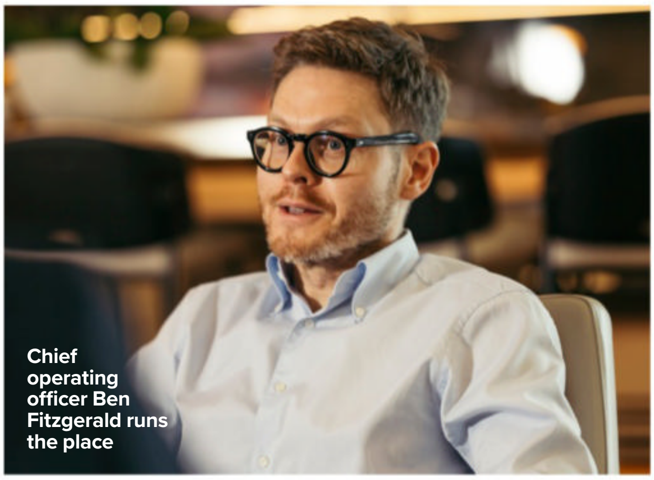
3D printers don't mind a night shift

The team's former home is gone, its footprint buried beneath Building Two. And with its demise came the chance to create the perfect F1 facility from scratch. Previously, the team operated in a state of high-functioning semi-chaos, the machining department the noisy, messy hub around which the rest of the operation had grown up in an ad hoc fashion. It also had myriad storage buildings and workshops scattered across the county, not to mention a reliance on third parties for equipment and techniques it couldn't afford.

Impressive on arrival, the new campus has the calm confidence of something high-performance and purpose-built, appropriately. And it feels like an Aston Martin space. Outside, the monolithic branding – diagonally divided into light and shade by the shadow of the building – is bold and beautiful. VIP parking teems with DB12s, visitors walk past a DBX on display behind reception and the hand sanitiser smells exquisite.

VIP parking teems with DB12s, visitors walk past a DBX behind reception and the hand sanitiser smells exquisite

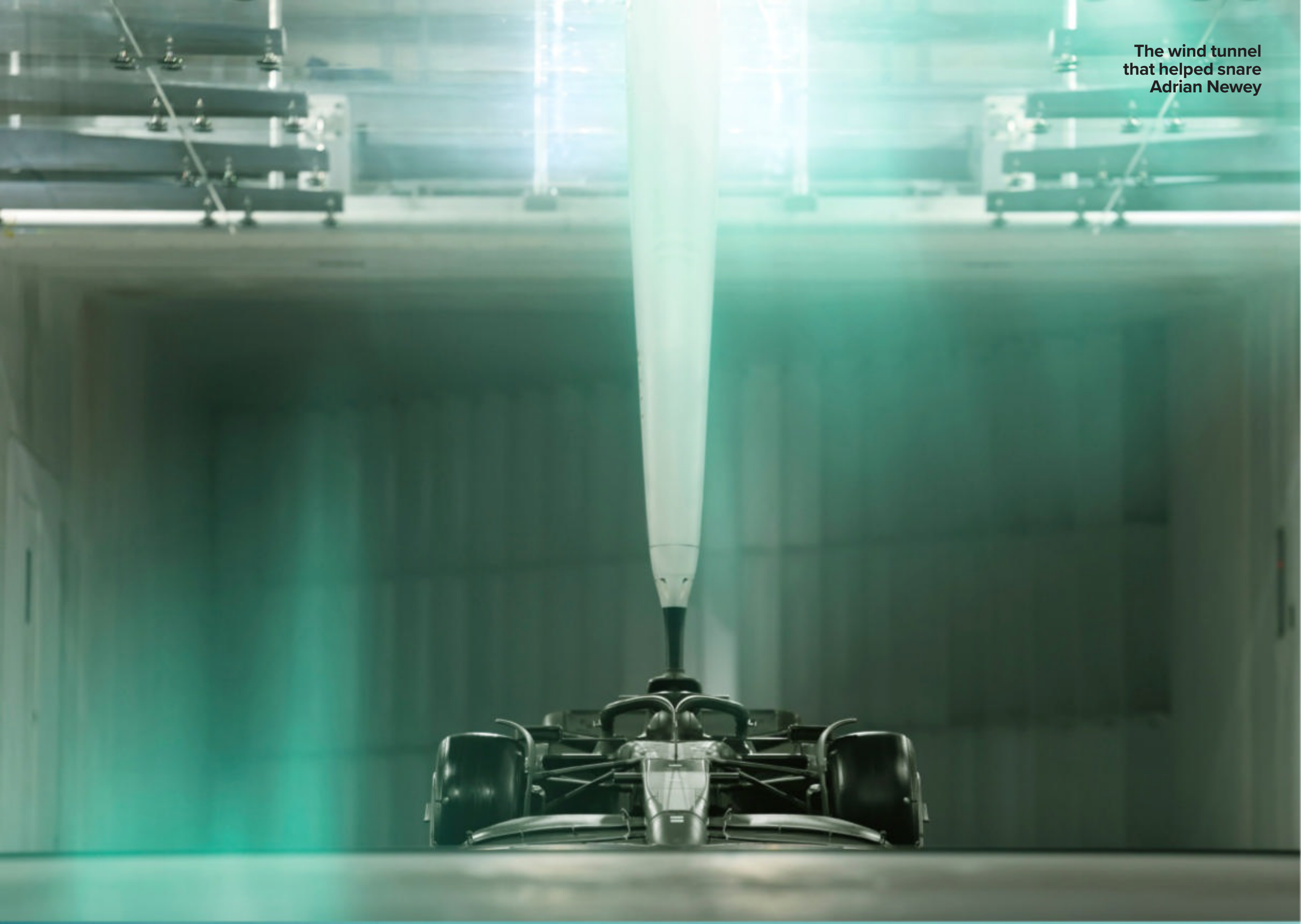
Free-ish to roam (if we photograph anything sensitive a thousand people will get upset), you're struck by the light, the space and the absence of that machine-oil aroma synonymous with traditional automotive manufacturing. A ground-level boulevard – The Street – runs the length of Building One, while sky bridges connect the three buildings. Your direction of travel from reception broadly mirrors the process by which a car is created: composites, machining, inventory and assembly and, finally, the build bays. Beyond those there's the finest gym you've ever seen and of course Building Three. On the first floor you'll find offices, the biggest of which is occupied by the design team, a coffee shop and mission control (we visit ahead of the first race of the season and mission control's already running on Australian time in anticipation). Outside, you're struck by the beauty of the setting – with 72,000 square metres of meadow, 10,000 square metres of lawn and more than 1500 trees, it's easy on the eye.


Chief operating officer Ben Fitzgerald runs the place

So, too, is almost everything you find inside. In assembly, a Brembo front brake caliper stops me in my tracks. It's being bled on a workbench; a complicated, multi-stage process thanks to the intricacies of its internal passages. Once complete, QD couplings allow it to be packed away ready for use already pressurised, saving the race mechanics precious time later. Machined from a billet of titanium (by Brembo, not Aston), its beauty is as much about the blank spaces the form frames as the metal that's actually there. Covered in cooling vents, fins, blades and tips, there's barely a flat surface on it. And despite being capable of withstanding temperatures in excess of 1000°C and unimaginable forces, it weighs just 2.5kg.

The build bays are empty, the cars that took shape within them already in Melbourne for the first race of the season. There, results will be mixed. Fernando Alonso and Lance Stroll qualify P12 and P13. The rain-affected race is a nerve-shredder. It's the kind of conditions in which you'd back the experienced Spaniard to do well. Instead he smears his car down one of Albert Park's crash-ravaged walls and it's Stroll who keeps his head to claim a fine sixth place. Disappointing, perhaps, given the level the team's striving for, but Cowell's quick to dismiss any suggestion the team's driver pairing is a weakness (both drivers are contracted until the end of the 2026 season).

Can Aston win both titles with Alonso and Stroll? 'Yes,' says Andy Cowell, without hesitation. 'The challenge is making the race car quicker. When you look at the lap time we need to gain in order to win races, it's car performance not driver.' ▶



The wind tunnel that helped snare Adrian Newey

New autoclave is big enough to bake a full chassis

Measurement arms feature throughout the building, for quality control

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BOSS
aramco
Valvoline
ELEMIS
Circle8
cognizant

Cowell's also encouraged by the direction of travel. 'Last year we won the championship in terms of the quantity of upgrades, but the quality of those upgrades wasn't strong enough,' he explains. 'The idea generation and the confirmation of those ideas within the factory wasn't robust enough. You end up with so much information you can easily get lost. We've worked to simplify that; to get down to the core things that make a race car quicker. That way we can be sure we've got a valuable update before we press the figurative button, releasing the data to manufacturing, and robustly land performance at the track. That's the thing I would say we struggled with last year.'

While managing technical partner Newey's focus is firmly on the new regulations, 2026 and beyond, Cowell's confident he'll help turn theoretical speed into actual lap times.

'Adrian understands the whole car, and he understands the feedback from the circuit and from the drivers,' continues Cowell. 'I believe he will bring great value in terms of translating what the drivers are saying, translating what the car is doing, into targets within the factory. My role is to pull a business together that enables the work that Adrian wants. His experience is incredible across many different regulation sets, and his competitiveness is tremendous – undimmed, I would say. I've just had lunch with him in and he's a very friendly, very warm guy. But there were a couple of things we talked about… It's lifting the bar, you know? Setting a new level of expectation. There's no ambiguity there and that's great – it's wonderful to have.'

A big part of the reason Newey's in Aston Martin green is the team's wind tunnel – just one aspect of this carefully choreographed rapid expansion overseen by chief operating officer Ben Fitzgerald.

'He saw the tunnel before it was finished, and I understand it was a key part of his decision,' says Fitzgerald. 'Lawrence introduced me as the king of upgrades, though that's operational king, of course. My contribution is getting the upgrades to the car as quickly as possible.'

Ben joined AMF1 in January 2023. Efficiently accommodating its workforce, together with facilitating the move from a procurement-based organisation to one that now makes 70 per cent of its cars by volume (up from 40 per cent, a leap from 80,000-ish manufactured parts per year to more like 250,000, reducing external spend by 30 per cent) is Ben's remit – and he loves it. 'We're one of the most operationally effective teams on the grid – albeit that's not being translated into performance just yet – and a lot of that is down to this campus,' explains Fitzgerald. 'The first of these buildings opened in May 2023, and we produced our first parts within 24 hours. But the planning began four years before that, in mid-2019. That's when we really established what the future of this team was going to look like, and the role this building would play in that future.'

In total, AMF1's currently at about 400,000 square metres, having come from a building of just 50,000 square metres. And with £200 million invested to date, it's not done yet. 'We are making huge steps forward as a team, but you've only got to consider what else is going on – new partnerships, another set of regulations, more in-sourcing – to see the challenge,' continues Fitzgerald. 'We make 70 per cent of the car, okay, but there's still a handsome sum to go at.'

There's much Ben's proud of, from the rich data pouring from the simulator and wind tunnel to the building's A+ energy rating and the beehives in the grounds that surround it. But it's what this place says about AMF1 he's most happy with. 'This is the team's home. When we think about the past, that wasn't so clear cut. This is our home, and the sheer brand presence when you come to this building is fantastic. It's an emphatic statement of intent.' car

IS THIS THE MOST ITALIAN THING EVER?

It's built in Poland and uses hardware shared across continents. But where does the Alfa Romeo Junior call home? We tour Italy in search of its soul

Words Mark Walton **Photography** Lee Brimble

Location would flatter any car. But the Junior is handsome anywhere

Last year, the morning after Alfa Romeo launched its new Milano, Italy's industry minister, Adolfo Urso, expressed his outrage. The government had known for months that the car was being built in Poland but Urso pantomimed his full, pearl-clutching horror.

'A car called Milano cannot be produced in Poland!' he fumed. 'This is forbidden by Italian law!' (He was referring to new EU legislation, designed to prohibit 'evocative' or 'Italian sounding' products that aren't actually made in Italy.) 'A car called Milano must be produced in Italy! Otherwise, it gives a misleading indication!'

This struck me as weird. Arguably, calling it an Alfa Romeo is a pretty big indication that it's from Italy, and most people probably don't even realise Milano refers to a city ('Isn't that a football club?'). But two days later, Alfa backed down and renamed the car.

'Although we think the Milano name met all legal requirements, we took the decision to change it to Junior to ease relations with the Italian government,' Alfa's then CEO, Jean-Philippe Imparato, told the press.

Which again got me blinking with confusion. Wait a minute – did you just say you're calling it the Alfa Romeo Junior to make sure it DOESN'T sound Italian? Bu.. eh... wha...?? I can't think of a name that sounds MORE Italian than the gloriously lyrical, roll-off-the-tongue Alfa Junior. The original GT Junior – a smaller-capacity, 1.3-litre version of the 105 Coupe – was launched in 1965, so it's been a legendary part of Alfa's heritage for 60 years now. Sophia Loren downing a mug of prosecco while sitting in a gondola wouldn't be any more Italian than an Alfa Junior.

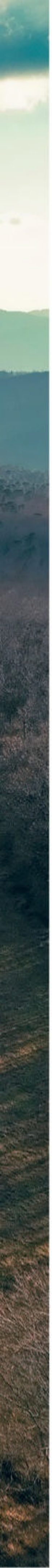
Ah – but would it? Maybe Urso the angry minister is right – maybe we're being duped? Maybe the new Junior really is just a rebadged, pan-European Stellantis platform – more Jeep Avenger than Giulia Sprint? Maybe Alfa is trolling us with a postcard of the Colosseum but with a Polish postage stamp! Clearly we need to put it to the test – a stress-test of really Italian, Made in Italy Italianness. In Italy.

So, is there anything more Italian than mamma's traditional spaghetti bolognese, poured lovingly from a jar with lashings of cheese on top? Turns out there is.

We arrive in Bologna on a sharp, cold winter's day and I immediately fall in love with the new Junior's styling. Seeing it on the street, riding on its spectacular 20-inch Venti alloys, it looks sensational, all the way from that unusual cut-out grille to its pert, cut-off tail. This is the top-of-the-range Veloce model, fully electric, 276bhp and priced at a heady £42,295. Add in an optional paint finish, parking cameras and the Sport pack (more about that later) and you're ▶

Smart pedals and extra alcantara on the steering wheel come with the Sport pack

Modest battery and immodest right foot hammer the range



MICHELIN
225/40 R 20
Alfa Romeo

In Sport mode the upgraded brakes get to do all the work

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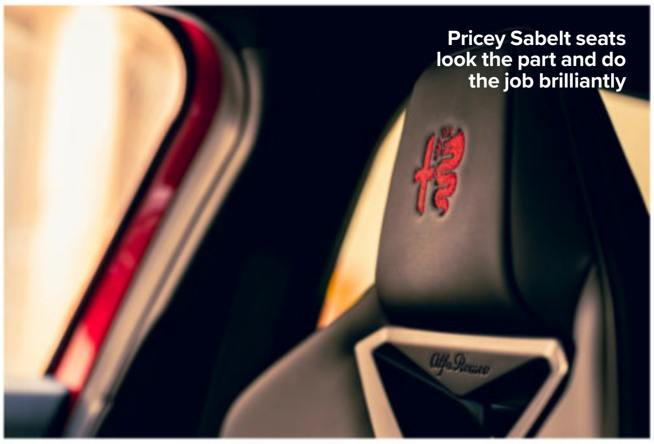
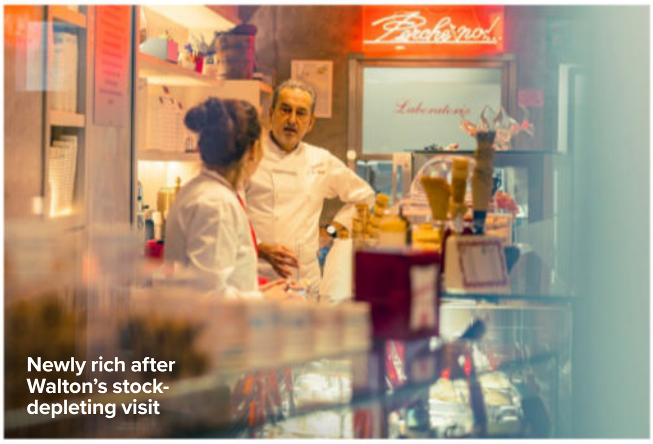


Pricey Sabelt seats look the part and do the job brilliantly



Newly rich after Walton's stock-depleting visit

quickly approaching £48k – quite a premium over the standard Junior Elettrica, which starts at £33,800.

But Alfa's made a lot of changes to warrant that price hike: as well as the extra power, the Veloce also gets lower suspension, upgraded brakes, quicker steering and a Torsen limited-slip diff.

If you've never been to Bologna before it's a beautiful city, full of palazzos and squares, colonnaded streets and tiny one-way alleys. Imagine Venice, if someone drained it. Many of the buildings are painted a warm, pinkish ochre (its nickname is Bologna La Rossa) and our Brera Red Junior looks a million dollars. The locals love it, in a way I'm sure they wouldn't love a Kia or a Renault.

The Junior is brilliant down these narrow streets. Of course the power delivery from the single e-motor is instant and satisfying, but also the steering is very direct, around two and a half turns lock-to-lock, making the car feel razor sharp and alert. It's quite stiffly sprung on those low-profile Michelins, but it's never crashy or aggravating over Bologna's many historic, Renaissance-era potholes.

We drive into the rolling hills of the Apennines and find some amazing, empty roads that look like they were designed by God for a Ferrari Dino

We drive through town to a small but renowned restaurant called De Cesari, a couple of streets away from the main Piazza Maggiore and its famous Neptune fountain. Opened in 1955 by Ilario Cesari, this small, dark-panelled eatery remains virtually unchanged 70 years later. Still family owned, it's now run by Ilario's grown-up grandkids, Riccardo and Valentina.

We're here, of course, for the bolognese, Bolognese style, which De Cesari has been making the same way for generations. When Riccardo serves me the small bowl of deliciousness, it turns out everything we think we know about this Italian classic is wrong – even the spag part of spag bol, because it should be served with tagliatelle (in this case, hand-made and surprisingly al dente). And the sauce, so meltingly smooth, is like a dark brown meaty paste with no tomato. I'm about to ask for ketchup but after a first mouthful I'm tempted instead to ask for seconds and have another bowl double-parked. Sitting in this packed restaurant, full of locals, I'm ready to believe this simple dish might actually be the most Italian thing ever.

Heading out of Bologna after lunch we drive south into Tuscany, with its medieval villages and fairytale landscapes. We drive up into the rolling hills of the Apennines and find some amazing empty roads, ribbons of asphalt that look like they were designed by God for a Ferrari Dino.

The Junior is no Dino. Don't get me wrong, compared to its cousins on the same platform (the Jeep Avenger, Fiat 600e, Vauxhall Mokka) the Veloce makes a really good fist of it. It's quick enough, sprinting to 62mph in six seconds, and it has that willingness to change direction, but when you really press on, the limitations start to show. The steering – so good in the city – is disappointing. Get on the throttle early as you exit a corner and that front diff may prevent you from skittering off into a ditch, but it can't stop the 254lb ft of torque mangling the steering feel, as the wheel tightens and convulses in your hands. The brakes too – Sport mode disables the regen braking, leaving the job to those beefed-up discs and calipers, but the pedal feel is still long-travel and inconsistent. ▶

Veloce is the one to go for, with lowered suspension

It's quite stiffly sprung but it's never crashy or aggravating over Bologna's many historic, Renaissance-era potholes

Altogether, the Veloce feels out of its comfort zone in what should be hot-hatch heaven. Alfa boasts about the car's 1635kg weight – which may be less than some competitors, but we need a sense of proportion. A Peugeot 205 GTI in the '90s weighed under 900kg; a Mk5 VW Golf GTI in 2003 was 1300kg… Things are just getting heavier, and as Galileo Galilei once said, there's no escaping physics.

The best thing to do, then, is back off to seven-tenths and just enjoy the scenery. Cypress trees! It's like we're in a scene from *Gladiator*.

We arrive on the outskirts of Florence and charge the car overnight. At 54kWh, the Junior's battery isn't huge and I work out we've done just 96 miles that day, draining down from 100 per cent to a quarter full. That gives us a theoretical range of just 130 miles – a lot less than the 200 miles Alfa claims. Maybe cold weather and some hard driving have had an effect, but it's clear the Junior is no long-distance cruiser. Thankfully the hotel charger works and four hours later we're back to full capacity at a cost of £28, around 29p per mile.

Next morning we drive into Florence, a short journey but one fraught with some Byzantine administrative stress these days. Since the summer of 2024 this beautiful city has been protected by what they call the *scudo verde,* or green shield. More than a regular congestion zone, this is a no-go area for cars, monitored by cameras and strictly enforced. If you're not a resident, driving into the restricted zone during the day will mean a swift fine, and the city is pocketing millions from hapless drivers.

There are a couple of ways round it: if you book a rental car or stay in a hotel inside the zone you get a few hours' grace; or you can drive into the city in the evenings or on a Sunday. (For our photo shoot we applied to the city and got an exemption for the day, which cost €5.)

Early next day we drive the Junior down to the River Arno and watch the sun rise over Florence's bridges. Old Florence, like Bologna, is a maze of tiny one-way streets, and once again the Junior's instant punch of torque and quick steering make it a pleasure to drive, squirting down alleyways and wedging its way into traffic.

Part of the pleasure is down to the Sport pack. For £2200 you get a bit of extra alcantara on your steering wheel, plus different pedals, kick plates and some nice mats, but more importantly you get quasi-bucket seats by Italian motorsport supplier Sabelt. The option is expensive, I grant you, but these seats are superb – high-bolstered, rib-stitched and supportive, and they raise the interior ambience.

Given that driving is so tightly controlled in the old town, the city is still rammed with traffic and it seems to come at you from every direction, like you're permanently trapped on a deranged, two-way Arc de Triomphe roundabout.

Time, then, to have the most Italian experience of all. There are lots of scooter rental companies across Florence, and I rent a classic Vespa 125 from a small local firm, Tuscany by Car. It costs £50 a day, including helmet, and on two wheels you're free to roam the restricted zone. Scooters are everywhere in the city, lining up at traffic ▶

Florence and the machine, both looking good

ALFA'S NOT THE ONLY ONE MAKING CARS ELSEWHERE

The **Toyota GR Supra** might seem like the epitome of the PlayStation-generation, midnight-racing Japanese sports coupe, but as a joint venture with BMW it's actually built in Graz, Austria.

Driving a Jeep Renegade is like having a bald eagle tattooed on one arm and a small espresso on the other – this symbol of American freedom and adventure is made in Melfi, Italy.

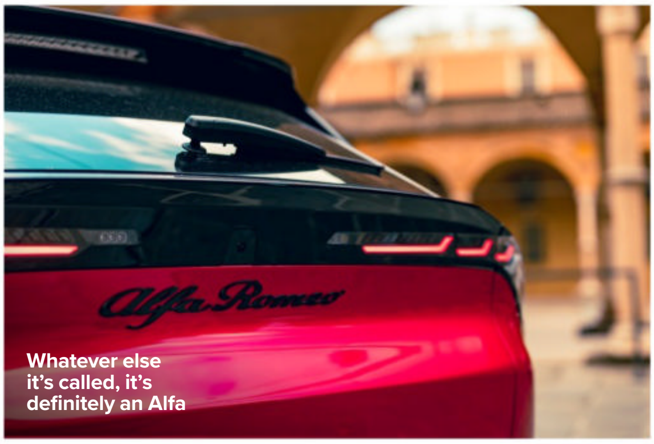
Originally created as a WW2 aero-engine factory, the Solihull plant in the West Midlands built the Land Rover – and Land Rover built Britain! (The current **Land Rover Defender** is built in Slovakia.)

Dacia is proud of its Romanian history, as it represents everything we love about the brand: cheap, pragmatic, resourceful, zero frills. Exactly the same reasons why the Dacia Jogger is made in Morocco.

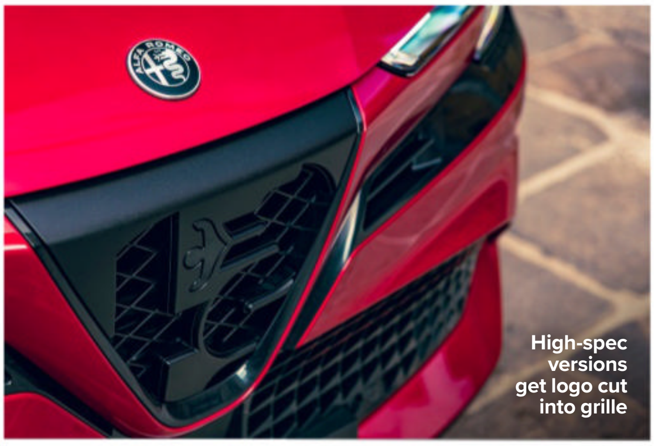
The original Mini was quintessentially British, personifying our contrary, penny-pinching, self-deprecating national character. BMW understands this, which is why the swanky current Countryman is made in Germany.

When you choose an Audi Q8 e-Tron you like to think you're buying a bit of Vorsprung durch Technik –in fact it's Vooruitgang door Technologie. It's built in Brussels.

If Donald Trump wants to make Canada the 51st state of the USA, the Stellantis plant in Brampton, Ontario is his beach head – the stars-and-stripes **Dodge Charger** is manufactured there.



Whatever else it's called, it's definitely an Alfa



High-spec versions get logo cut into grille

lights and criss-crossing every street. After five minutes it's clear why. Oh, the freedom! The Junior can't compete with this, no matter how quick the steering.

The Vespa's easy twist-and-go controls, the buzzy engine and the feeling that you're not just spectating, you're part of the city – it all puts a massive smile on my face. The scooter immerses you in the chaos, a world with no meaningful lanes, road signs are ignored and even one-way streets are a matter of opinion.

While the scooter is allowed in the zone, the pedestrian heart of the city is off limits so I park up kerbside (so easy!) and walk into the main Piazza della Signoria. Nearby, tucked down an alleyway, is Perche No! – one of the oldest and most famous gelaterias in Florence. Ice cream was invented in Florence back in the 1500s, when Cosimo Ruggieri, court astrologer and magician, was challenged by Catherine de' Medici to create an unforgettable dish. His *fior di latte* was so astonishing, it soon led to the Cornetto.

In the intervening 500 years, Florence has refined Ruggieri's recipe into the modern-day gelato. Literally, nothing tastes more Italian than this, which is why – for research purposes – I'm about to eat a bucketload of it.

Perche No! (which means Why Not!) has been going since 1939, and in the tiny store we're served by the patriarch of this family-owned business, Ciro Cammilli. 'All our gelato is home-made, fresh, every morning,' Ciro reassures me as I scan the bright colours. 'We only use the best ingredients – the pistachios come from Sicily, for example. The best!'

In the end I try the rich crema fiorentina, then the pistachio (which is sensational) and then the honey and sesame. And then I go back for more, for a cup of your classic, milk-and-chocolate stracciatella. All of it tastes so light and smooth in a way that factory-made ice creams don't. Ciro tells me: 'The secret to gelato… after you have eaten, you count to 10 and then your mouth should feel clean.'

> **The Vespa's easy controls, the buzzy engine and the feeling that you're not just spectating, you're part of the city – it puts a massive smile on my face**

It's so delicious and moreish I want to sample all 26 flavours, but the day is drawing to a close and I don't want to puke on my Vespa. So we're soon back in the Alfa and mulling over the big question: just how Italian is this car?

Well, the worst thing about the Junior is the price. I checked, and a few short years ago the entry-level Alfa, the Mito, cost less than £19k. Electric cars are stupidly expensive.

But if you accept that rampant, liver-filleting inflation is just a fact of modern life, the Junior holds up very well. It really does feel Italian, as though the team who did the Giulia and Stelvio really did develop this car too. While its battery weight might limit the fun, there's something irrepressibly spirited and stylish about the Veloce – it feels zingy and confident like an Italian car should.

So ignore the fact it's built in Poland – the whole Made in Italy argument is out of date. These days, your iPhone is made in China, Branston Pickle is owned by the Japanese and AC Milan, the legendary football team, is owned by Americans. To use the Italian industry minister's phrase, the world is full of misleading indications. But I reckon the Alfa Junior is the real deal. **car**

ALFA ROMEO JUNIOR ELETTRICA 280 VELOCE

PRICE £42,295 (£47,595 as tested)
POWERTRAIN 54kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 276bhp, 254lb ft, 6.0sec 0-62mph, 124mph
WEIGHT 1635kg
EFFICIENCY 3.3 miles per kWh (official), 2.2 miles per kWh (tested), 200-mile range (official), 130 miles (tested), 0g/km CO2
ON SALE Now

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RIN

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ID. EVERY 1

ISE AND REPEAT

Thinking big with small cars has worked before. But as VW unveils the electric ID. Every1 concept, the stakes have never been higher

Words Piers Ward **Photography** John Wycherley

Rivian and Volkswagen. Two car makers bound together by a joint venture and yet separated by far more than the ocean that stretches between their respective headquarters.

Compare and contrast their two most significant launch events. For the ID. Every1, a small electric concept that VW desperately needs to succeed to restore its credentials as a maker of people's cars, VW chose the vast and soulless Merkur-Spiel Arena near Düsseldorf airport; for the R2 and R3 reveal, RJ Scaringe and his crew went for an intimate old theatre near Newport Beach, 20 yards from the surf.

The crowd went wild for RJ, whooping and hollering like a group of Swifties; there was polite applause for VW CEO Thomas Schäfer.

It's moments like this that bring into focus the uphill struggle that legacy car manufacturers face, battling the chutzpah and cool of the start-ups. No amount of tie-less execs wearing sneakers can change it – they just don't have the vibrancy.

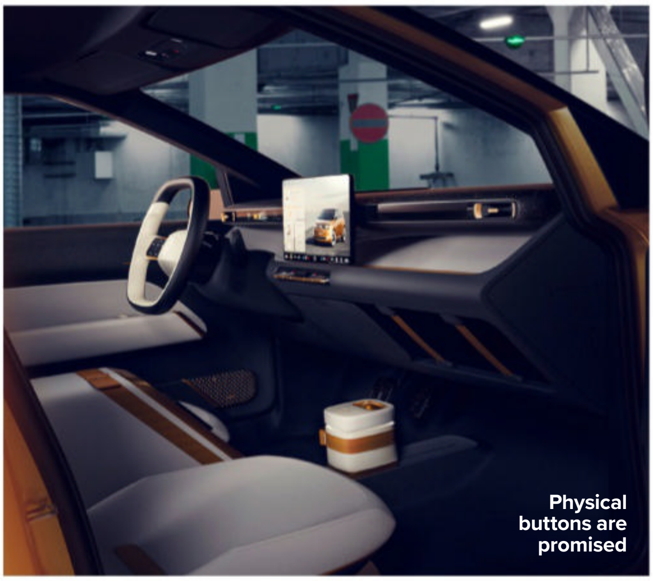
Nor do they have the product. ID. 3 or Rivian R3? I know which I'd rather choose to be my lifestyle statement and daily driver.

Could the tide be turning, though? Possibly. The new ID. Every1 has an upbeat feeling to it, and VW has form when it comes to aspirational yet attainable small cars. Its Lupo (which ran from 1998 to 2005) and Up (2011 to 2023) brought new generations of drivers into VW ownership by being classless and yet classy, and by squeezing big-car tech into small-car packages.

I remember driving the 3L Lupo – the name a reference to the litres of fuel it would consume in 100km; about 94mpg – on a short journey in London and being staggered by how grown-up it felt. It brought to life the cliche 'small yet perfectly formed'. Prompted by its combination of cheeky looks, good build quality and neat design touches, you focused on the cutting-edge tech and smart engineering rather than penny-pinching frugality.

There's also a life lesson from the Lupo era: read the runes before embarking on a new strategy. The danger signs for Wolfsburg's current malaise were there for all to see from as far back as 2005, when VW decided to replace the Lupo with the more basic and less expensive Fox, and all traces of personality vanished overnight.

Scroll forward 20 years and it appears that someone at VW has been listening to the echo of that decision, as the ID. Every1 seems ▶



Physical buttons are promised

THE NEW ELECTRIC CONCEPT, LIKE THE LUPO AND UP, HAS A CHARACTER ABSENT FROM THE ID. 3

intent on restoring the magic of the Lupo and Up. All have a life and character conspicuously absent from the ID. 3.

The current management at VW openly admits the company got things wrong in the recent past and lost focus on its heartland. The choice of Queen's *Under Pressure* as the ID. Every1's launch music seems like a none-too-subtle acknowledgement of where the company finds itself: deep in the financial mire, in part because the ID cars have not hit the mark.

Going forward, dull is ditched and instead there's an almost religious focus on VW's brand essence. No more flights of fancy: Schäfer recently said there was no scope for gambling with the likes of another Scirocco. 'It's about executing a perfect fleet that fits the segments in our core regions,' he tells me. 'The best, full stop.'

Hence the need for the next wave of production VWs to do the same trick their predecessors pulled off: milestones like the Golf, Polo and Beetle became part of people's lives, forming attachments that could keep buyers coming back for decades.

The production version of the ID. Every1 will be at the heart of this strategy. In fact the centrality of the new car to VW's hopes and dreams is where the analogy with the Lupo and Up might seem to break down. They were peripheral, niche products, targeted at a modest number of buyers prepared to pay slightly over the odds for a classier, cleverer small car.

Schäfer talks of the ID. Every1 as being, above all, 'affordable for almost everyone'. When the production ID. 1 launches in 2027, it should start at £17,000. The Renault 5 has rightly earned plenty of praise for its base price of £22,995, but the slightly smaller ID. 1 will undercut that significantly.

To achieve that, VW has slashed costs wherever it can. For example, the hardware between the front bulkhead and the front axle will be identical on the ID. 1 and the upcoming ID. 2, which will share its front-wheel-drive MEB Entry platform.

Software, which has not done VW many favours recently, will be key to the success of these new small cars. The ID. 1 will be the first car to be launched with the new software system that's come from the joint venture with Rivian, using zonal architecture and a system-on-chip structure that is much more flexible. Kai Grünitz, VW's technology chief, says: 'The advantage of zonal architecture is that I

THE VW WILL SIGNIFICANTLY UNDERCUT THE RENAULT 5, PRAISED FOR ITS KEEN PRICING

can put one, two or three, four zones in the car – if I've got a vehicle in the lower price segment, with lower functionalities, [it would need] just one zone … it can be very cost effective in the ID. Every1 as it's still the same software.' This approach allows VW to integrate new functions without changing the software, leading to an upgradable system that adapts during the life of the car.

VW is not the only major manufacturer cottoning onto this – BMW is testing it out with its Heart of Joy architecture. Thankfully VW has resisted the questionable naming strategy.

The ID. 1 will manage 155 miles between charges and will do 81mph thanks to an all-new electric motor providing 94bhp. This is where we hit the first snag with the production ID. 1, in that the electric Up from six years ago managed 161 miles and produced 82bhp. The Dacia Spring is £15k and will do 140 miles. You can see where this is going – the ID. 1 might be VW's next great hope, but the price points at this end of the market are so compressed that you don't get much margin for error. Schäfer admits as much: 'If you look at it only from profit maximisation, walk away from it [the electric city car]. I'd rather do large SUVs.' ▶

Wheelarch crease is cleverer than you'd think

The ID. 1 will go into what Schäfer terms a 'relatively small segment for Europe'. To make it work VW needs to maximise economies of scale, and it needs to trim battery costs. That's why the ID. 1 will use the cheaper lithium iron phosphate cell chemistry, as loved by manufacturers including BYD and Tesla, in its lower-range models. There are certain obvious wins: fit a smaller battery, pay less for it. And China's overcapacity in batteries, when taken together with cooling world demand for EVs, means cell prices are on a consistent downward trajectory.

It's also a question of timing. Everything has had to come together, both from a tech perspective and from the wider VW Group point of view; Skoda and Cupra will build ID. 2 equivalents, thus lowering the cost per unit. Even if that all works as planned, there are no guarantees people will buy them. Muses Schäfer: 'Is it easy? No.'

Step forward Andreas Mindt, head of VW design, who had the unenviable twin tasks of delivering an appealing design and ensuring it will hit the cost targets. Normally, designers only want to discuss the purity of the visuals, but at the unveiling Mindt is equally keen to stress ways his team has managed to reduce costs. 'The design of the rear is affordable because the rear door is just one piece of sheet metal. Everything is reduced – our car has no cladding or inserts, no decoration. We have turned affordable into beautiful.'

It's hard not to agree with him. Partly because he's so affable but also because there is a tightness and solidity to the design that has that just-right feel. Looking 80 per cent the same as the production car that's due in 2027 (those lovely wheels will make it across), it *has* to bring some excitement back to Wolfsburg and restore a sense of joy after the turgid ID. 3, 4 and 5. The 3 made an appearance at the ▶

VW'S RESET STARTS HERE

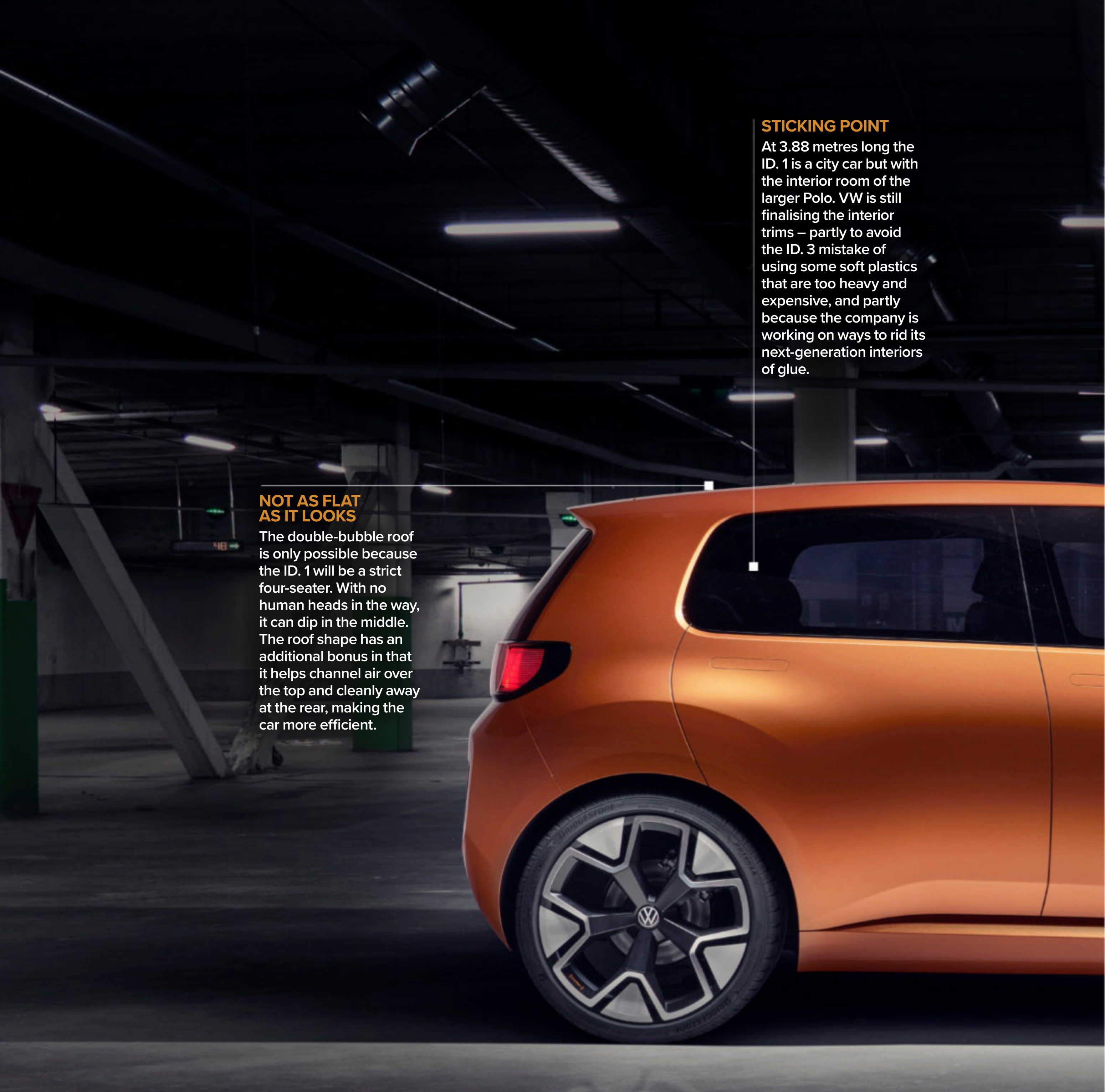
ID. 2
The standard 2 hatch (previewed here by the concept ID. 2All) is due in early 2026 and, starting at around £21,000, will be in effect the electric Polo. EV packaging efficiencies mean it will be short but vast inside.

ID. 2X
The T-Cross equivalent. Just front-wheel drive, it'll come with a choice of batteries that give a maximum range of 280 miles. Built in Spain alongside the Skoda and Cupra equivalents, it'll likely be the big seller of the family.

ID. 2 GTI
The one to get excited about. The latest Golf GTI shows Volkswagen has regained its grasp on what a hot hatch should be, so there's hope for the electric GTI. VW promises it'll prioritise excitement over raw power.

ID. EVERY1
WOB DN 5E

IT MAKES THE ID. 3 LOOK LIKE A SHY TEENAGER; THE COMPUTER NERD TO THE CHEERLEADER ID. 1



NOT AS FLAT AS IT LOOKS

The double-bubble roof is only possible because the ID. 1 will be a strict four-seater. With no human heads in the way, it can dip in the middle. The roof shape has an additional bonus in that it helps channel air over the top and cleanly away at the rear, making the car more efficient.

STICKING POINT

At 3.88 metres long the ID. 1 is a city car but with the interior room of the larger Polo. VW is still finalising the interior trims – partly to avoid the ID. 3 mistake of using some soft plastics that are too heavy and expensive, and partly because the company is working on ways to rid its next-generation interiors of glue.

same reveal event in Düsseldorf and looked completely underwhelming, hunching its shoulders like a shy teenager, the computer nerd to the cheerleader ID. 1.

The Every1 has some neat aero touches designed to extract maximum range from the battery. Sharp edges at the rear give the air a clean break as it leaves the car's surface, with three vertical lines forming the basis for this: one at the bumper, one at the light and the other at the C-pillar.

Along the car's flanks, it's the opposite – you need smooth surfaces so as not to disturb the air too much. Around the front and rear wheelarches, instead of a crease that flows all the way around the wheel from sill to sill, the metal folding is confined to a small area above the top of the wheel. It's enough to help give the car a purposeful stance but without the aero trade-off.

Mindt is keen to stress his aversion to the 'bar of soap' style that's all too prevalent among EVs. 'When you look at [Giorgetto] Giugiaro and how he designed cars – he did the Golf Mk1, the DeLorean, the [Lotus] Esprit and so on – he had very flat surfaces, super flat. But then he had very nice acceleration at the end of it.

'When you look closely at the [Ferrari] P4, you had a guideline for your eye. It was not like a piece of soap. It was guided by some creases and this is exactly what we did here. The surfaces are not flat, they have tension towards the end of them.'

There's obviously been a lot of soul-searching at Volkswagen. All the execs I speak to are focused on brand identity and really trying to nail down what a Volkswagen actually is; what it stands for in today's world. There does seem to be more energy about the company now, and a sense of renewal. Mindt, never a man to say one word if he can say 15, is so enthusiastic about it that he keeps banging the table for emphasis during our interview.

VW knows it won't be easy: Grünitz admits the company isn't planning to build the ID. 1 in vast numbers – 'we've been very con-

OUT OF TOUCH
There will be physical controls to cover all the major elements and no more haptic buttons on the steering wheel. Hooray! The upper trims on the production car will come with two screens: dials and infotainment. VW claims tastes are changing and drivers no longer want vast touchscreens. The base ID. 1 won't have one – your phone will double as the screen.

GOLDEN RATIO
Just because EVs don't need long bonnets that doesn't mean they *must* be short. Design chief Andreas Mindt says sticking to a conventional bonnet allows the windscreen rake to be optimised for a smaller glasshouse. Less glass equals less interior cooling, vital on a car with a small battery.

PORT ON THE STARBOARD SIDE
The charging port is in the front right wing of the concept, and the production car will follow its lead. Cost is one reason – when all the major components are under the bonnet, why run the wiring to the rear flank? It also means there's more space in the cabin because you don't need to hide the charge port behind interior trim.

servative'. The production systems are flexible, so output of particular models can swiftly be scaled up or down depending on demand. But even with the low-ish goals, both Grünitz and Schäfer claim it will make money. It has to, given all the recent travails.

The timetable – a production car in 2027 – looks laggy, given that the Kia EV1 and Renault Twingo will be with us by then, which means some of the ID. 1's oxygen might have been stolen by the time it arrives. Volkswagen is aware but counters that the sort of upheaval it's been through was never going to be a quick fix. Grünitz claims the time taken to go from design to road is roughly three years, which is much faster than VW used to be: 'We are not slower than competitors in China.'

And if the rivals the new car will face in 2027 offer better range for less money, Volkswagen might regret the ID. 1's likely stats. It's possible the stars might align in terms of infrastructure improvements and people's shifting attitude to range, but I fear it'll struggle to truly follow in the Lupo and Up's wheel tracks. Cheap in EV terms it may be, but its lack of range means it's unlikely to be a great democratiser like the Polo or Golf. Rather than a brilliant compact all-rounder, it it'll likely be a second car for a lot of families. It's not the sort of car that will be crammed with tents and wet wipes and pointed in the direction of Glastonbury.

On the other hand, it looks very good, and it represents a continuation of Volkswagen's reset and a chance to look forward to a brighter future. If the ID. 2 (see panel) is the debut of VW's new line-up, the ID. 1 is the tricky second album.

Does the future of the European car industry rest on it? Given the quality and quantity of newcomers from Korea, China and elsewhere, buyers will have a lot of choice. Schäfer predicts that small electric VWs will 'drive the adoption rate of electrification'. He stresses: 'We have to make this car successful. It's in our name … If anybody can do it, it's us.' **car**

PORSCHES FOR

1299 SL
LB15 SUG
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EVERY POCKET

From Micra-priced roadsters to Bugatti-budget rarities, the pre-owned Porsche market contains many cherishable treasures but also plentiful pitfalls for the unwary. We're here to help

Words Ben Barry **Photography** John Wycherley

S169 ORU

Not long ago a Porsche 918 Spyder sold for $3.93m (approximately £3m) at auction, a record-breaking figure so far beyond the original £650k that even *The Sun* reported it.

Yet the tabloids missed a more astonishing scoop several years before, when photographer Dan Bathie picked up the Porsche Boxster pictured here for just £3500 on Facebook Marketplace.

While those two extremes bookend this Porsche buying guide, the other sports cars, SUVs and EVs in the middle (all sourced from the Porsche Club GB and Porsche GB) sit mostly in the £10k-£90k bracket – meaning they're the stuff of attainable dreams for many *CAR* readers.

Naturally Dan's Boxster is not in concours condition. Its headlights are yellowed and the paint rough in places, but his early 2.5-litre example wears the same silver exterior and terracotta interior colours as the 1993 Boxster Concept, and has provided him with 8000 miles of reliable use with only DIY servicing and a used back box to reach 100,000 miles.

You can't have more fun on four wheels for this money. You don't need to go beyond high four figures to bag a very nice first-generatioin Boxster, with £15,000 rarely breached for the cream of the crop. That's incredible given the Boxster's significance in saving Porsche from near-certain death, not to mention its general excellence.

Peak output of 201bhp means it can get breathless on straights, so there's a case for seeking out the 2.7-litre facelifted version with 217bhp and a two-stage intake for better torque (plus smoked indicator lenses and a heated glass rear screen), but threading through tighter turns it's all about the impeccable balance, crisp flat-six soundtrack and steering so delicate I swear I feel air in the front tyres being squeezed through corners.

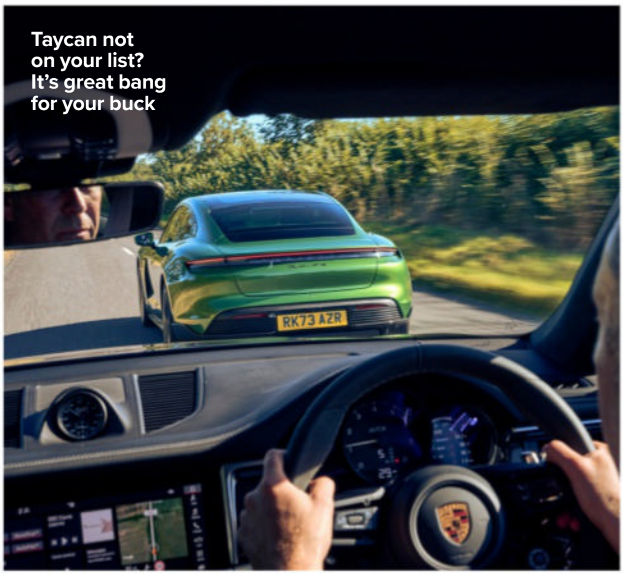
Dan Baines from TOP 555, a dealer specialising in luxury and performance cars, rates them highly too, dismissing concerns about image and praising the way they drive. But he emphasises the need to secure proof that the notorious intermediate shaft bearing has been replaced, otherwise you risk it failing with terminal consequences.

Dan's pick? A 3.2-litre Anniversary Edition with black or Coco Brown hide. 'There's a whiff of Carrera GT about them, which doesn't hurt,' he sums up.

It took a decade and one model generation for Porsche to add a roof to the Boxster and create the Cayman in 2006, but the 981 generation introduced in 2012 would be our choice.

The design matured into a mini supercar look (partly because the designers were freed from using 911 doors), and the mid-engined dynamics sharpened considerably. For four halcyon years Porsche combined this visual and dynamic heaven with a naturally aspirated flat-six across the range, only to – needle scratches off vinyl – slot a charmless turbo four into facelifted 718 models. (You'll need £60,000 minimum for the GTS that later reintroduced a flat-six.)

Dave Matthews' early base-spec 2.7-litre looks gorgeous in Guards Red with optional 20-inch alloys (standard 18s look like space savers). True, it's pretty stark inside, but the driving position is perfection – low like a racer, pedals dead ahead, manual gearlever a handspan from the steering wheel, visibility excellent. ▶



Taycan not on your list? It's great bang for your buck

Second Cayman was the first to look this good

Base-spec Cayman viewed from insane-spec GT3

Similar cars start from £25,000, rising to £30k for the 3.4 S and £40k-plus for the GTS, which bundled desirable options like the Sport Chrono package (lap timer, adaptive engine mounts), a sports exhaust and dynamic bi-xenon lights.

But for Richard Gotch of Porsche Club GB, base spec is best. 'They're fabulous cars, peak Porsche,' he says. 'The steering in particular is fantastic in the 2.7s. I remember driving a 3.4 GTS with larger wheels and brakes and some of the sweetness was lost.'

This is not a particularly fast car, with 271bhp, but it steers with trademark Porsche precision (although the now electrically assisted rack can feel slightly isolated), rides beautifully, and everything from the bite of the brakes to the shift of the six-speed manual has the mechanical immediacy and consistency we love of Porsche. Even driven at a fraction of its potential, it feels alive.

Dan Baines praises their reliability and predicts that they'll hold their values – so long, that is, as the spec is right, with buyers favouring the PDK transmission, Bose audio upgrade and full leather interior. 'Don't get the plastic dashboard,' he urges.

For some, the urge to go Cayman became stronger because the 911 grew larger when the 991 era debuted for 2011, adding 100mm to the wheelbase (bringing more stability for the handling, and more space in those plus-two rear seats), not to mention controversial electric assistance for the steering. Perhaps surprisingly, weight actually fell about 40kg.

Now 10 years old, the early 991 models are in their slightly unloved middle age, no longer new, not yet classic, as the owner of this immaculate Carrera S, Russell Connelly, attests. 'People at meets have been a bit sniffy,' he comments. 'It's not a new 992, it's not a classic 997, but it's more modern and usable than the older models and you still get the naturally aspirated engine.'

Bang on. An early 991 remains a fantastically satisfying 911, particularly for regular use, with the sense of interior quality and extra space a marked step on from both the previous 911 and the Cayman.

Baines reports no known engine issues, and 991 Carreras are also relatively affordable – the cheapest, earliest cars start from £40,000 for a 3.4 Carrera with 340bhp, with the Carrera S upsizing to a 394bhp 3.8-litre flat-six and sweetening the deal with extra kit including adaptive dampers.

This car does not ride as well as the Cayman, feeling a little too reactive to bumps when driven gently, and it absolutely feels like a larger, more luxurious, more isolated sports car in comparison.

But the ride eases with speed, and there's real dynamic purity to tap, whether that's the eagerness of the turn-in or the way it hunkers down and bites into the surface on acceleration and feels so ▶

For some, the urge to go Cayman became stronger because the 911 grew larger when the 991 era debuted for 2011

PORSCHE
911 Carrera S
F11 RUS

Unfashionable 991.1 currently great value. Snap 'em up!

What's £100k between friends?

A re-engineered 4.0-litre flat-six with 26bhp extra is a key reason why later 991.2 versions command such premiums

steadfast under braking. It's a 911 through and through.

The engine in particular is sensational, combining fizz and response like the Boxster and Cayman with performance that really sparkles as the engine passes 7000rpm. This one also has the PDK dual-clutch transmission, which wins our vote thanks to its punchy shifts and around-town ease.

'It's hard to say a bad word about them, except maybe they're a little dated inside,' thinks Baines. 'Someone offered us a sub-5000-mile GTS manual recently. It was like a poor man's GT3 with ceramics and all the toys but crazy money at £90k. That's the one people will clamour over in five or 10 years' time, though.'

Thing is, you'll get a same-era GT3 for similar cash. Early 3.8-litre examples trade from £90,000, but 991.1 GT3s have been plagued with catastrophic engine issues. Porsche evolved the engine through E, F and G iterations and warrantied them for 10 years, but given these cars are now around a decade old, you need to know your plan B should your E, F or G go pop. It's a key reason why later 991.2 versions command such premiums, the big draw being a re-engineered 4.0-litre flat-six that upped performance by 26bhp to 493bhp and stretched the revs 500rpm to 9000rpm.

Baines says: 'The 991.2 is really where the fun starts for a modern GT3 – £117k is the entry point, rising to £130k for something with every option. I've not driven many better cars for less than half a million quid, plus you can drive it and not lose too much.'

This one's owned by Simon Haynes, a dedicated biker who had to have the more hardcore Clubsport version for full visor-down focus.

Tom Jaconelli of supercar and performance car dealer Romans International confirms this is *the* spec. 'The Clubsport package with carbon race seats, half rollcage and ceramic brakes commands a premium over Comfort spec,' he tell us. Whichever you choose, he says, all 991.2 models are scarcer than the later 992.

For all its hardcore track focus, it's astonishing just how optimised the 991.2 GT3 feels for a quick British B-road. There's a lovely elasticity to its chassis, gorgeous feel to the super-accurate steering and a wonderful fusion of stability and agility, even on tricky surfaces. I'm struck by how its narrower track and calmer chassis make it in some ways preferable to today's 992 GT3.

At the core of it all is that 4.0-litre flat-six, which lugs from nothing, responds instantaneously and revs and howls like a Le Mans racecar when you breach 5000rpm. Match it with the manual if you fancy (it is superb, and more valuable), but this car's crisp, punchy PDK shifts suit the powertrain perfectly, while saving your bank balance from a clumsy downshift. I'd own this car forever.

Today it's law that Porsche track cars cost more than the plusher models they're based on, but back in the '90s the 968 Club Sport's £29,975 price represented a £4572 saving over a 968 – logically so, because the rear seats, air-con, airbag, sound deadening and electric windows were all removed, saving 50kg.

The Club Sport gained 20mm lower suspension, manual Recaro bucket seats (not necessarily a good thing as the driving position is too perched for me) and inch-larger 17-inch alloys, though the engine's 236bhp performance is unchanged. In essence it was a quick fix for Porsche – at the time short on cash, finished with front-mounted fours, waiting for the Boxster – but the Porsche Club notes both the Club Sport's low 1923-unit run and time-intensive production play into collectors' hands, summing up very positively: 'The 968 has both rarity and… is arguably the best-built Porsche of them all.'

991.2 GT3 is remarkably manageable on the road

Yes it is closer to the camera, but it's also big

This lovely example owned by Andy Foster is finished in Grand Prix White (black, Maritime Blue, Guards Red and Speed Yellow were also available) with optional graphics and colour-coded alloys.

'I could've bought a really nice one for £20k eight years ago,' says Baines. 'Today they're more like £30k and I don't see them moving from there – £50k gets you into a Cayman GT4, after all. Just remember that a Cayman S should cost less over two years given Club Sports are over 30 years old.'

Its 3.0-litre capacity might match the Club Sport's contemporary rival, the BMW M3, but this is a huge four rather than a silky six. Surprising, then, just how smooth this unit is and how it pulls and revs so keenly. Porsche used a revvier over-square bore to stretch the capacity, while VarioCam variable valve timing bridges low-down torque and high-rpm power.

Four-pot power is also key to the exceptional balance of this chassis – not only is it pushed back further in the nose than a six ever could be, a transaxle balances weight far better than a regular transmission bolted to the back of the engine block. Tossed through corners, the 968 exudes failsafe front-engined handling with a side order of mid-engined finesse that's more nuanced than its meaty steering initially suggests.

But if you're thinking you need more seats, more ground clearance but still a sporting edge, you could go 911 Dakar or – perhaps more ▶

THE RARITIES

Since the 2010s Porsche has been selling special 911s to select customers. **Dan Baines** from TOP 555 is your guide

991 R

What? GT3 RS performance in a body more discreet than a GT3 and manual only (when GT3s were all PDK); if the RS was mostly for the track, the R was a street car
When? 2016
How much? £136,901 (new), £500k (peak), £300k-£350k (now)

Dan says: 'The R was the first of the super-exclusive GT3-type models. Porsche limited supply to 991 units and they hit £500k shortly after launch. Prices fell as "low" as £300k and are now no more than £350k.'

991 GT2 RS

What? Turbocharged version of Porsche's most track-focused 911
When? 2017
How much? £228,458 (new, with Weissach pack), £500k (peak), £300k-£350k (now)

Dan says: '30 per cent came to market quickly as flipped cars – I know someone who made well over £100k just driving his about for a few months. Today they're in the low £300k bracket – a big premium over a good GT3 RS Weissach but quite a different driving experience.'

992 DAKAR

What? 911 Carrera 4 GTS with a rally-raid makeover. Just 2500 made
When? 2023
How much? £173,000 (new), £250k (peak), from £175,000 (now)

Dan says: 'Bit of a YouTuber/ Instagrammer fad. Owners typically decline my offer, then two months later accept a lower bid from Porsche to stay in their good books. Very spec dependent – either go full Paris-Dakar look, Rothmans livery and all, or full comfort- spec and do the school run.'

991.2 GT3 TOURING

What? A GT3 without a wing but with a choice of manual or PDK. Strong whiff of R
When? 2017
How much? £127,820 (new), £230,000 (peak), £190k-£210k (now)

Dan says: 'Uptake probably wasn't quite what Porsche imagined – a 991 Touring is much rarer than the 992 Touring, and even rarer than the R with just 47 UK-supplied cars. A right-hand-drive UK example with 12,000 miles is £195k, with a collector-spec car north of £200k – £60k-£70k more than a 991.2 GT3.'

992 GT3 RS

What? Next best thing to a road-legal Le Mans GTE car, with downforce prioritised over top speed
When? 2023
How much? £222,400 (new, with Weissach pack), £370k (peak), from £235k (now)

Dan says: 'These cars listed around £225k with the Weissach pack, quickly shot up to £370k and then – as more cars hit the market – dropped back to around list price within a year. Weissach pack cars are now worth considerably more than a stock car.'

997.2 GT3 RS 4.0

What? 4.0-litre version didn't just add 200cc – it brought some magic too
When? 2011
How much? From £130,000 (new), £500k-plus (peak), £500k-plus (now)

Dan says: 'With only circa 30 cars supplied to the UK and just 600 worldwide (each individually numbered) these are a collector's dream. With the Mezger engine, manual transmission and compact dimensions, it's a surefire collectible. A few can still be seen being driven as intended on track – probably by people who bought at the list price…'

It’s law that track cars cost more than the plusher models they’re based on

Old cars, expertly cared for: immaculate

If you're thinking you need more seats, more ground clearance but still a sporting edge, you could go 911 Dakar or Macan GTS

sensibly – Macan GTS. Slotting below the Cayenne and based on significantly re-engineered Audi Q5 underbits, the Macan is comfortable, spacious, plushly appointed and decent to drive.

There's only been one generation since 2014 and it's recently had a stay of execution despite the new EV model coming on stream, but there are two crucial updates: 2019 brought new LED lights and fresh infotainment, while another tickle in 2022 replaced buttons with haptic switchgear. It's also the only Porsche here to be available as a diesel, which you can now snap up for as little as £16k.

Our example is a nearly new GTS from the Porsche press fleet, sporting a 434bhp 2.9-litre twin-turbo V6 much like an Audi RS4's. For Dan Baines at Top 555, it has to be a GTS, which will set you back up to £30k for a 2016 model. 'We've probably sold 80 Macans, the diesels and four-cylinder petrols included, but I always come back to the GTS,' he says. 'The 2019 facelift with the later back lights still look a year old, and I prefer the Panamera-style controls, not the later haptics. You do hear about transfer box problems, but put a private plate on and it still looks fresh.'

'The GTS interior pack is particularly desirable [contrast stitching, multifunction sports steering wheel, 18-way adaptive sports seats and more],' adds Tom Jaconelli, 'but they sell quickly, hold their money and I think the new EV model will probably only help values.'

If it's a highly appealing car to use daily, the Macan GTS doesn't ▶

SUVs and EVs can still feel like Porsches

968 is great value, but don't expect it to be bulletproof

Anyone fancy a drink? Martini, by any chance?

Rare and wildly expensive, but 918 Spyder is a joy to drive

Acceleration from low speeds is astonishing, but it's the midrange punch that leaves me reeling

quite live up to the 'sports car handling in an SUV body' dream when you drive it like Waitrose is closing early. Air suspension is standard, but the wheels go at the road surface like chimpanzees banging at bongos, front-end bite isn't entirely convincing even on P Zero Corsas and the last bit of dynamic polish is lacking.

A Taycan is the better driver's car – Porsche's first EV and one it created from a clean sheet. Once again, ours is the GTS. There are faster, more brutal Taycans including the Turbo S (the original's 740bhp now pushed beyond 900bhp), but arguably a GTS is sweetest of the lot. With 590bhp, its performance is more measured and exploitable, if still unhinged, and a more granular feel tingles through its controls. Above all else, the Taycan GTS glides over a B-road where a Macan fights – it's in the unflappable damping, the cool precision of its steering, how it's so agile yet so planted with its wide track and low centre of gravity. It's a 968 Club Sport on rollerblades.

The Taycan is not perfect. We've often struggled to squeeze 200 miles out of a fully charged battery (the latest models have improved range) but the larger chink in a Taycan's armour is depreciation once they've ceased being four-wheeled tax breaks. Baines recalls a customer paying £80k for a Turbo S that'd listed at double that just 3000 miles before. A company fleet's loss is your gain.

'Depreciation has been awful,' concurs Jaconelli. 'The Turbo depreciated most, the 4S has been most sensible, with the GTS pick of the bunch. We're selling to private buyers now they're in the £50k-£70k bracket, and I think they'll start to hold their value.'

Just pick your spec carefully. Body styles range from the saloon you see here to a shooting-brake-style Sport Turismo and the Cross Turismo that adds a little SUV flavour to the same recipe. Then there are battery sizes and even seating layouts to consider.

Jaconelli notes that currently the Cross Turismo is the most in-demand among his customers, but stresses battery size is more important than body style. 'The Performance battery is only standard on higher trims and that can be a deal breaker,' he warns. He also suggests holding out for a five-seater rather than the roomier but less versatile four-seat cabin layout. 'And the panoramic roof helps brighten what can be quite a dark interior.'

Baines suggests checking for recalls. 'They've not been without issues – they're something of a test bed, after all.' At least Porsche covers batteries for eight years or 100,000 miles.

If the Taycan was a test bed, the earlier 918 Spyder was a laboratory on wheels. Picking up where the 959 and Carrera GT supercars left off, it riffed on the (four-cylinder) 919 Le Mans winner with a naturally aspirated V8 good for 600bhp, with twin e-motors up front adding another 282bhp, all-wheel drive and emissions-free running for up to 18 miles. All in, the 918 Spyder is good for 875bhp with a monster 940lb ft.

Porsche built more 918s than its LaFerrari and McLaren P1 rear-drive contemporaries combined (918 units versus 499 and 375 respectively) and the 918 perhaps lacked their edge. A decade on, Baines sees the positives: 'It was the least hyper of the hypercars, but a 918 is easy to just jump in and drive, they feel like they'll last 100 years and all-wheel drive makes the power accessible,' he notes. 'They're also known to be reliable cars, which makes a huge difference.'

Acceleration from low speeds is astonishing, but it's the midrange punch that leaves me reeling – third, fourth and fifth gear basically feel like the same ratio, all allowing devastating acceleration.

Brake pedal feel is woeful, road noise roars through the carbonfibre tub like breakers on a pebbly beach and integration between pure electric and hybridised V8 power can be lumpy, but this remains a very special drive – particularly the unwavering composure through corners, how it steers so precisely despite the big hit of e-power flowing through the front axle, and the way it combines the whizzy futurism of its powertrain with a reassuringly mechanical, gritty feel.

'Prices peaked about two years ago, and now they've dropped back and are stable,' says Jaconelli. He recommends getting a car with the Weissach pack – a factory option that included magnesium wheels, alcantara trim, and carbonfibre for the windscreen frame, roof, rear wings and mirrors. It cost £70k when the cars were new but it adds £200k; a Weissach-spec cars on delivery miles can cost £1.5m.

Both Baines and Jaconelli point out that while much of the Weissach pack can be retro-fitted by Porsche, it costs more and adds less value than the original factory specification.

But with the all-electric Mission X on the horizon as Porsche's hypercar follow-up, it seems likely the 918 Spyder will follow its predecessors in steadily accruing value over time.

For the lucky few, investing in a 918 Spyder probably makes a lot of sense. The rest of us can dream – and perhaps keep an eye out for that £3k Boxster. **car**

Spyder
918 Spyder

As if you'd ever forget what you were driving

PORSCHE
918 Spyder

QUICK! BEFORE

What's so great about our featured

BOXSTER (986)

Significant for saving Porsche in the 1990s, the Boxster is now unbelievably affordable. It's still great to drive and if anything looks better with age than fresh out of the showroom. This is a great mid-engined bargain

▶ The expert's view

'They sound brilliant, the steering's amazing, they go like billy-o… The engine can be slightly fragile, though, so you want proof of the IMS bearing fix. I'd go for the limited edition 3.2 Anniversary Edition.'

Dan Baines, Top 555

PRICE WHEN NEW £33,950
APPROX VALUE NOW £7000
POWERTRAIN 2480cc 24v flat-six, five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 201bhp @ 6000rpm, 177lb ft @ 5000rpm, 6.9sec 0-62mph, 152mph
WEIGHT 1252kg
EFFICIENCY 29mpg, n/a g/km CO2

CAYMAN (981)

Sharper to drive and better looking than the original, 2012's Mk3 kept the naturally-aspirated flat-six. It's peak base-spec Cayman

▶ The expert's view

'They're reliable, they hold money and that's likely to continue with the electric Cayman coming. Even a regular S is very good and barely more than £30k but they need spec – Bose, PDK and full leather are all desirable. A GTS is under £50k – you'll struggle to get a better Porsche for less.'

Dan Baines, Top 555

PRICE WHEN NEW £39,749
APPROX VALUE NOW £27,000
POWERTRAIN 2706cc 24v flat-six, six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 271bhp @ 7400rpm , 214lb ft @ 4500rpm, 5.7sec 0-62mph, 165mph
WEIGHT 1310kg
EFFICIENCY 34.4mpg, 192g/km CO2

911 CARRERA S (991.1)

The 2011 car has all the benefits of the larger, more modern 911 shape, while being far more affordable than later examples and still using the epic naturally-aspirated flat-six: that's quite a combination

▶ Expert's view

'You'll get something nice for £45k-£50k, or a GTS for £60k. There are no known engine issues, and first-generation 991.1s are naturally-aspirated flat-sixes.'

Dan Baines, Top 555

PRICE WHEN NEW £85,988
APPROX VALUE NOW £44,000
POWERTRAIN 3800cc 24v flat six, seven-speed PDK, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 395bhp @ 7400rpm , 325lb ft @ 5600rpm, 4.5sec 0-62mph, 189mph
WEIGHT 1470kg
EFFICIENCY 29.7mpg, 224g/km CO2

911 GT3 (991.2)

This is the modern GT3 sweet spot for value, durability and British B-roads, dating from 2017. Surprisingly easy to live with given its race heritage

▶ Expert's view

'Starting from £117k, the 991.2 GT3 is a £20k-£25k upgrade over the 991.1, but you can buy them confidently. A Clubsport is very saleable, particularly with ceramic brakes and buckets. The 991.2 reintroduced the optional manual gearbox so always do an over-rev check.'

Dan Baines, Top 555

PRICE WHEN NEW £111,802
APPROX VALUE NOW £130,000
POWERTRAIN 3996cc 24v flat-six, seven-speed PDK, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 500bhp @ 8250rpm, 339lb ft @ 6000rpm, 3.4sec 0-62mph, 197mph
WEIGHT 1430kg
EFFICIENCY 22.2mpg, 290g/km CO2

IT'S TOO LATE

octet, and what to watch out for

968 CLUB SPORT

Club Sport from 1993 is the peak of Stuttgart's transaxle era. A beautifully balanced car, it gets you into a track-focused Porsche for VW Golf money. But given the car's age, bear in mind that it will need extra care

▸ **Expert's view**

'I'd love one, and they look so much fresher than a 944 Turbo. Don't overlook the UK-only Sport, which added a few more features back into the spec. Neither are going anywhere in terms of value.'

Dan Baines, Top 555

PRICE WHEN NEW £29,975
APPROX VALUE NOW £40,000
POWERTRAIN 2990cc inline-four, six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 236bhp @ 6200rpm, 224lb ft @ 4100rpm, 6.5sec 0-62mph, 157mph
WEIGHT 1320kg
EFFICIENCY 27mpg, n/a g/km CO2

MACAN GTS

Hot hatch fun meets SUV practicality. A big seller for a decade, so there are plenty around, with the price of entry around £16k, and the looks have aged well

▸ **Expert's view**

'Macans hold their money really well. A GTS is the sweet spot since they stopped making the Turbo. If you can stretch, the 2022 facelift is highly desirable, and in terms of spec look out for the GTS interior pack with contrast stitching.'

Tom Jaconelli, Romans International

PRICE WHEN NEW £73,400
APPROX VALUE NOW £52,000
POWERTRAIN 2894cc 24v V6 turbo, seven-speed PDK, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 434bhp @ 5700rpm, 406lb ft @ 1900rpm, 4.5sec 0-62mph, 169mph
WEIGHT 1960kg
EFFICIENCY 24.1-25.0mpg, 255-265g/km CO2

TAYCAN GTS

Depreciates as quickly as it accelerates but Taycan is a sublime Porsche driving experience for into the EV era. Way ahead of its time

▸ **Expert's view**

'It's a proper Porsche but deprecation has been awful. There's fresh interest now they're £50k-£70k, with the Cross Turismo most popular for us. The Performance battery is only standard on higher trims. I'd recommend the five- rather than four-seat layout.'

Tom Jaconelli, Romans International

PRICE WHEN NEW £104,990
APPROX VALUE NOW £75,000
POWERTRAIN 83.7kWh battery, two e-motors, two-speed auto, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 590bhp, 627lb ft, 3.7sec 0-62mph, 155mph
WEIGHT 2310kg
EFFICIENCY 2.6-3.0 miles per kWh, 277-mile range, 0g/km CO2

918 SPYDER

Epic drive and sci-fi tech for Porsche's once-in-a-generation hypercar from 2013. It's currently one third the price of LaFerrari, but more usable than the Ferrari or McLaren P1

▸ **Expert's view**

'They're very sensitive to mileage: 5k-10k is considered high and those cars are £1m. The Weissach pack is also important: £70k new but worth £200k now – delivery-miles Weissach-spec cars command £1.5m.'

Tom Jaconelli, Romans International

PRICE WHEN NEW £651,092
APPROX VALUE NOW £1.1m
POWERTRAIN 4593cc 48v V8, two e-motors, seven-speed PDK, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 875bhp @ 8600rpm, 940lb ft @ 6600rpm, 2.6sec 0-62mph, 211mph
WEIGHT 1674kg
EFFICIENCY 94mpg, 71g/km CO2

Our thanks to: Porsche Club GB, Richard Gotch, Simon Haynes, Andy Foster, Russell Connelly and Dave Matthews

Our cars

HELLO MERCEDES GLC DIESEL PHEV + GOODBYE MINI & BYD SEAL + AUDI S3 MEETS RS3 + BMW i5 MEETS OUR READERS

Looks very familiar, but there's something rare under the bonnet

Jordan Butters

Plugging the gap

Only Mercedes combines the range of diesel with zero-emissions electric power. The best of both? By **Ben Barry**

The story so far

Merc's mid-size SUV, here in unusual diesel PHEV form
+ Roomy and well equipped
- Those official mpg figures create some wild expectations

Logbook

Price £61,110 (£61,825 as tested) **Performance** 31.2kWh battery, 1993cc four-cylinder turbodiesel plus e-motor, PHEV, 328bhp, 553lb ft **Efficiency** 565.0mpg (official), 75.6mpg and 4.2 miles per kWh (tested), 11g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 14.3p per mile **Miles this month** 877 **Total miles** 2427

For a powertrain that seems to make so much sense, it's perhaps surprising that Mercedes-Benz is the only car maker currently offering a plug-in hybrid diesel. The logic runs that an electric powertrain covers most trips, but the super-frugal four-cylinder diesel steps in once battery charge is depleted.

In the real world of drivers plugging in much less frequently than in theory they might, it could represent a better solution than a petrol plug-in.

This month we're welcoming the Mercedes-Benz GLC 300de to the *CAR* fleet, the plug-in diesel version of Mercedes' mid-size SUV and rival to the likes of the BMW X3, Volvo XC60 and Audi Q5.

It promises no range anxiety and no need to wait while charging, and with better mpg than an equivalent petrol plug-in hybrid too. This GLC 300de's five per cent benefit-in-kind tax rate also compares reasonably well with an EV's two per cent rating and falls way below the comparable purely diesel GLC's 35 per cent. (The plug-in petrol 300e is equally attractive.)

So if you want most of an EV's tax break but fewer of its drawbacks, the GLC 300de could be a highly tempting sweet spot.

Volvo was first to the plug-in diesel niche with a series-production car in 2012 (the Swedes now don't do diesel at all), but Mercedes has been producing plug-in diesels since the E-Class PHEV debuted in 2018. The GLC 300de arrived during the first-generation's life cycle in 2020 then returned with the second generation for 2022.

Its fundamentals comprise a 1993cc four-cylinder diesel engine, nine-speed automatic transmission and all-wheel drive, with a 31.2kWh lithium-ion battery feeding an e-motor that's good for up to 80 miles of driving range on its own – a big improvement on the last-generation model, with its 13.5kWh battery and tiny 27.3-mile range.

Combined output of 328bhp with 553lb ft is pretty healthy (194bhp and 325lb ft torque from the engine, 134bhp and another 325lb ft from the electric motor) though the 300de is also the heaviest GLC you can buy – a kerbweight of 2310kg is about 350kg portlier than a regular diesel, and 250kg more than the previous 300de owing to the larger battery.

Pricing starts from £61,100 in Urban Edition trim, then ▶

Range and roominess make it a friend of the family

Diesel is more efficient than petrol, so you're into diminishing returns with plug-in hybrid tech

walks up through three different AMG Line variants with a big *ta-da!* at £75,610. We're testing the entry-level trim, with only this car's attractive Spectral Blue metallic paint adding to the RRP, to the tune of £715.

Adaptive LED headlights, a parking package with reversing camera, heated electric door mirrors and moody black exterior trim are all standard. This spec level also brings 20-inch multi-spoke alloys with coil springs up front and air suspension for the rear.

More important for my two teenagers is the infotainment: the MBUX multimedia system with its 12.3-inch digital instrument binnacle and 11.9-inch portrait-orientated touchscreen, wireless charging pad and – most crucial of all – multi-colour ambient lighting and huge puddle lights that project the three-pointed star on the ground like a reverse bat signal.

A couple of key reasons are usually cited as to why other car makers don't do plug-in diesels. One is expense, because a diesel engine is already more expensive to produce than petrol before you start adding hybridisation.

And then there's the fact that diesel is also more efficient than petrol, so you're into diminishing returns with trying to make it more efficient still with plug-in hybrid tech.

Because Mercedes – rather remarkably – also offers a petrol plug-in GLC as well as equivalent four-cylinder petrol and diesels, it's possible to directly compare all this.

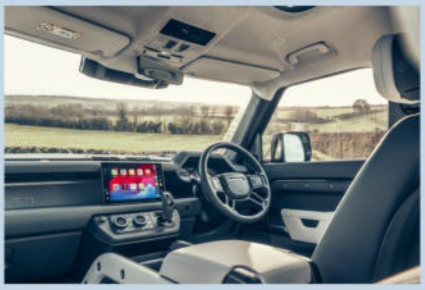
The GLC petrol plug-in is £2250 cheaper than our diesel, though that's true across the line-up for petrols and diesels. As for efficiency… Well, the official stats do show a bigger gain for the petrol, but the improvements are so extreme they should be taken with a pinch of salt – my calculator says the plug-in diesel's 565mpg is 1039 per cent more efficient than the 300d's 49.6mpg, while the plug-in hybrid petrol posts a 1117 per cent increase with 470.8mpg compared to the 300 e's best of 38.7mpg.

Plug-in hybrids are the most use-case dependent of all powertrains, of course, which makes the official triple-digit WLTP mpg figures even more meaningless than usual. It's also where this long-term test comes in.

My driving routine is probably representative of the ideal customer, with lots of short and medium trips achievable on a battery charged from home, then less frequent longer runs to random locations where I don't want to be hostage to the hassle, uncertainty or much higher prices of public charging points.

It's going to be fascinating to see how we get on.

Running low doesn't mean you need to charge



LAND ROVER DEFENDER
MONTH 2

A womb with a view

'Athleisure' is everywhere, not just gyms. The Defender's interior might be dubbed 'luxility'. It shouldn't work. But it does.

The Defender long ago stopped being a couple of seats and a bit of bodywork bolted to a tractor chassis. It's a luxury car, and this interior, with its ventilated white leather, is no place for hard-working border collies.

But there's just enough Defender stuff in here to differentiate it from Land Rover's pure-luxe flagship, the Range Rover. And crucially everything just works, with a masterful fix of exemplary ergonomics, slick touchscreen and actual physical controls for a lot of the important stuff, like climate control, quick access to the off-road modes and disabling the annoying stuff (lane-keep assist and the speed-limit bonging) before you're even off your driveway.

JLR's infotainment has quietly become one of the best, with classy graphics, flawless CarPlay compatibility and intuitive access to everything from radio stations to wade depth sensing. Throw in ridiculously comfortable seats, super-sized storage bins and a charging pad from which it's impossible to dislodge your iPhone, and you have a cabin to love and to cherish.

BEN MILLER

The story so far

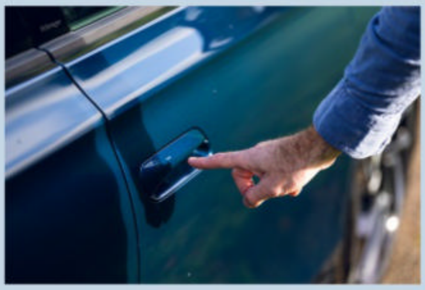
The biggest Defender with the supercharged engine, here to try to prove that more is more

+ Special Forces style; syrupy power; gorgeous cabin

- Some aircraft carriers are easier to park – and less thirsty

Logbook

Price £118,235 (£126,310 as tested) **Performance** 4999cc supercharged V8, 493bhp, 5.7sec 0-62mph, 149mph **Efficiency** 19.7mpg (official), 18.1mpg (tested), 324g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 32.0p per mile **Miles this month** 476 **Total miles** 1314



VW ID. 7
MONTH 4

Losing touch with reality

We've rightly pilloried Volkswagen for the ergonomic flaws that afflicted the first generation of ID electric cars. Seemingly in the rush to launch EVs, it cut corners – perhaps most famously with the new generation of infotainment lacking illumination for heating and volume controls. These are thankfully fixed on the ID. 7 and all subsequent model launches.

But there remain details that grate. The touch-sensitive keyless locking button on the driver's door handle is hopeless. I'd estimate it works one time in three, so I tend to lock the doors with the key instead. It's telling that the Blue Oval eschewed the recessed touchpad door handles for the Ford Capri based on this MEB platform, preferring simpler traditional physical handles.

It's a similar story with the electric windows. Many VWs have deleted the buttons for the rear windows from the driver's armrest? There are now just two switches and a touch-sensitive button to swap their operation between front and rear. I often brush the button by mistake and open the wrong windows. Is this progress? I fear it's an annoying case of digital technology not always answering real-world problems.

TIM POLLARD

The story so far

ID range's ergonomic glitches are easing, but not banished

+ Calm nature, relaxing to drive, viably long range

- Some design choices are about penny-pinching, not human-helping

Logbook

Price £51,550 (£55,270 as tested) **Performance** 77kWh battery, e-motor, 282bhp, 6.5sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 4.7 miles per kWh (official), 3.2 miles per kWh (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 9.4p per mile **Miles this month** 789 **Total miles** 5197

MAZDA MX-30
MONTH 3

Life's getting in the way

I'm not using the MX-30 the way Mazda intended, and I'm paying the price. You see, this car would be perfect if (a) you have off-road parking (b) you have a home charger and (c) you commute 10 miles a day and rarely go on long journeys. If this is you, the R-EV range-extender version would be perfect – sadly I meet none of these criteria.

So instead of using a stored, overnight charge every day, I end up belting up and down Britain with the rotary-engined range-extender revving its guts out, as it tries to keep the battery from dropping to zero. This is not an efficient way of using the battery – or the 830cc rotary generator – and I'm struggling to get close to 30mpg.

And every time I think about plugging in and topping up the battery at a charging point (giving myself a theoretical 53-mile electric range before the rotary motor kicks in) I'm met with all the usual EV aggro: chargers that don't work, phone apps that won't connect, payment that won't go through.

Believe me, when you drive a range-extender, your patience for this kind of crap evaporates.

So I just fill up with petrol instead.

MARK WALTON

The story so far

Other owners may find the MX-30 more effective than us

+ The range extender brings flexibility...

- ...and I'm abusing that flexibility by burning petrol every journey

Logbook

Price £33,495 (£35,295 as tested) **Performance** 17.8kWh battery, e-motor plus 830cc rotary range extender, 168bhp, 9.1sec 0-62mph, 87mph **Range** 53 e-miles, 400 with engine **Efficiency** 37.2mpg (official), 27.1mpg (tested), 21g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 23.2p per mile **Miles this month** 901 **Total miles** 6076

It might look anonymous, but this is a seriously good EV

Goodbye

BYD SEAL MONTH 6

The disruptor

If Tesla provides the benchmark, this is a great alternative. By **Jake Groves**

The story so far

Not one but two Seals have been tested over six months

+ A refined, slick, fast and well-built EV

- Efficiency hasn't been that great long-term

Logbook

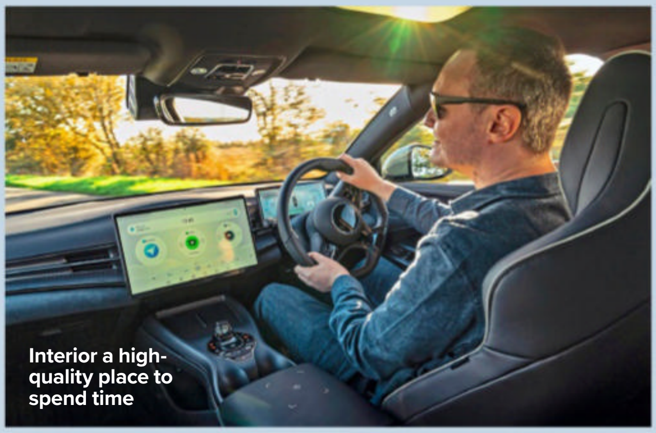
Price £45,695 (£46,571 as tested) **Performance** 82.5kWh battery, e-motor, 308bhp, 5.9sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 3.4 miles per kWh (official), 2.66 (tested) **Range** 354 miles (official), 342 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 5.8p per mile **Miles this month** 650 **Total miles** 3070

The mission was to keep an open mind. Before starting my six months as a Seal driver, I'd had mixed experiences with BYD. Some versions of the Dolphin hatchback were much better than others, and the Seal U DM-i plug-in hybrid felt extremely soggy and bland. But, on the other hand, the electric Seal had come a close second behind a Tesla Model 3 and ahead of a Polestar 2 in a test conducted by Ben Barry, who's not easily won over.

During the last six months, I've run not one but two Seals – a blue all-wheel-drive Excellence and this green rear-wheel-drive Design – and I can safely say both have been among the most impressive EVs I've ever spent time with. Those anonymous looks hide a fabulously appointed interior, with thick, soft seats and a driving position to die for. The ride quality is a good balance, offering cushioning without being too sloppy, and the steering feels alert and communicative.

And it's quick. Even the lesser Design version with its single motor wasn't exactly lacking in shove – to the point that I'd suggest going for that one over the Excellence model. Design saves you around £5k and gives a bit more range, making it even more competitive against a similarly-spec'd Model 3 or Polestar 2.

Is it perfect? No. There are some weird quirks to the infotainment, like the daft rotating screen, and some frustratingly fiddly swipes and taps needed to adjust the climate control or safety aids. Having no easily accessible switch for the regenerative braking meant I left it in one mode almost the entire time I had the car. Despite two software updates, the


Interior a high-quality place to spend time

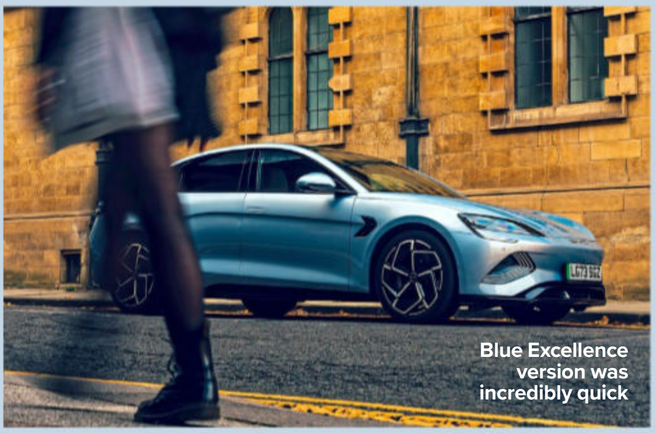
Alex Tapley

cross-traffic alert seemed terrified of roundabouts. And personally I'd find a hatchback preferable, rather than the boot it actually has.

To top off the negatives, on a recent 200-mile motorway run in freezing temperatures I had to charge before I arrived at my destination. During the same trip, it also struggled to charge quickly. In other weather it would reliably give 300 miles to a charge, and the charging itself was usually quick. The efficiency figures aren't great, but much of that is down to my vigorous driving style; others may well get better.

Overall, the Seal has become one of the best long-term test cars I've ever run – up there with an Audi R8 Spyder (for obvious reasons) a VW Up GTI and a Mazda 3.

The two Seals I've run have both been among the most impressive electric cars I've spent time with



Blue Excellence version was incredibly quick

Jordan Butters

Although the two cars are significantly different, the Seal reminded me most of the Mazda, in that it was very good at doing what it was designed to do, always felt like a quality product and was perhaps quite likely to be overlooked in favour of its competitors.

You'll have noticed the price, which may be a surprise if you think of Chinese cars as being cheap. In fact, BYD's aim with the Seal is not to undercut on price, but to offer more or better for similar cash. And if you asked me which I'd rather have – this, a Model 3 or a Polestar 2 – it would be this. The Polestar, post-facelift, still rides like it's wearing leaf springs and the tech feels almost obstinately fiddly in places. The Model 3, meanwhile, doesn't feel as well put together as the Seal.

In the market for a car this size? I urge you to at least try the Seal. If you do, you may be pleasantly surprised.

Count the cost

Cost new £46,571 **Part exchange** £32,215 **Cost per mile** 16.0p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £4.67

AUDI S3 **MONTH 5**

Better in small doses

Just because a sportier version is available, does that mean the S3 is second best? By **Curtis Moldrich**

The story so far

Time to find out just how close the S3 runs the RS3

+ Understated looks; decent range; interior quality

- Lacks the final degree of sportiness next to the RS

Logbook

Price £47,490 (£51,135 as tested) **Performance** 1984cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 328bhp, 4.7sec 0-62mph, 155mph **Efficiency** 34.4mpg (official), 19.7mpg (tested), 188g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 27.0p per mile **Miles this month** 613 **Total miles** 2320

The S3 is quick and engaging enough, but the shadow of Audi's flagship RS3 looms large. At least in theory the RS is dynamically sharper and more engaging, giving the potential to be more rewarding. But then again, it's also more expensive.

Time, then, to get some answers and scratch the itch about Ingolstadt's hot hatch and saloon. The plan is simple: test the power and comfort of both cars on the autobahn before taking on more challenging Alpine roads around the Austrian-German border.

Visually, the RS is in a different league: wide, aggressive and finished in brighter colours. Next to the RS painted in punchy Kyalami Green, it's as if my S3 in sedate District Green has gone on an acid trip.

Get inside and immediately the RS3 feels familiar but different. It's lower than the car I've spent months in and its sport seats hold you that bit tighter. So far, so locked in. Most of the switchgear is the same, with the biggest difference an upgraded steering wheel: covered in alcantara and flat at both top and bottom, it's grippier and feels more satisfying to use.

The unrestricted bits of autobahn come in dribs and drabs rather than a continuous stretch, which gives me several chances to draw breath and assess the car in between higher-speed bursts. My focus is on the RS3's five-cylinder engine. On paper it's significantly more powerful, making 394bhp to my S3's 328bhp, and capable of 0-62mph in 3.8 seconds to my S3's 4.7 seconds. In practice, the difference is even greater: the RS feels infinitely more alive.

The turbocharged four-cylinder of my S3 has never felt slow, but compared to the RS3 it's flat-footed. The RS3's five-cylinder opens in a more natural, effortless curve – and one even more connected to my right foot. Somehow, it makes the S3's progress seem laboured in comparison; not a feeling I've experienced with the S3 in any other context.

Keep the RS in the right rev window and it sings, rewarding you with instantaneous power and a soundtrack you'll hear in no other new car. It's a far cry from the simulated sounds of the S3. I don't quite hit the car's v-max of 174mph, but I come close – and the whole car feels more composed and comfortable at speed. Both cars are on winter tyres, but the RS3 feels ▶

RS is wider, brighter, angrier, costlier than S

KY74 EDX
KY74 EAJ

S and RS both available as hatch and saloon

The RS3's steering feels very good here, and transmits more from the tarmac to my hands

much smoother – in fact, the RS on winters is like the S3 on year-round tyres.

Soon we're on to the Alpine roads, and with them a chance to back-to-back the dynamics. In the S3 I try the easily overlooked Dynamic Plus mode. Nestled in a corner away from the other driving modes, I'm told this is a party mode Ingolstadt's engineers added to give the S3 more bite. Mission accomplished: the S3 goes from well tempered to feral, dropping two cogs and keeping the revs high and ready.

It feels as though it's on a short leash, and it translates to quick – but not RS3 quick – response from the right pedal.

As I carve up the salty mountain roads, the S3's Torque Splitter slingshots the car around hairpins, pushing more power to the outside wheel. But it keeps the S more in line than I'm expecting and forces me to tweak my steering angle. It makes the car faster and better behaved – but it reduces the need for driver input. Such is the grip, there's very little for me to correct or do, even on these icy roads. Vorsprung durch technik, and all that.

Back in the RS3 and it's the same, but more so. More power comes with more grip, and the RS3's upgraded Torque Splitter translates the RS3's power to the road while rotating it the exact amount you want.

The RS3's steering feels particularly good on these roads. More tactile and slightly heavier than the S3's, it affords a more precise touch – and transmits more from the tarmac to my hands. The steering itself feels that bit more direct too, making the S3 feel somewhat vague and numb in comparison.

This trip also gives us the chance to explore the RS3's extra mode, called RS Torque Rear. When engaged, it diverts much more power to the rear, and allows a certain amount of slip angle before gently putting the axles back in line. Drifts owe more to engineering than driver skill.

So which would I have? On a trackday, the RS3 every single time. It's effortlessly fast, and it'll worry supercars. The steering is tactile and precise, the suspension well damped but firm, and its various assistance systems capable of creating so much grip that even 394bhp struggles to unstick it. Throw in an engine that offers much more than half the engagement of Ingolstadt's V10, and the RS3 once again moves the super-hot hatch goal posts.

But the S3 is already more than enough for me. It's subtle enough to go under the radar, and in the 70mph-limited UK it has an abundance of shove for B-roads and motorways. Throw in the hand-me-down RS Torque Splitter and Dynamic Plus mode and the S3 has more than enough grip and performance too. Plus, it doesn't look like an angry Tic Tac.

My advice? Take the S3 and keep the circa £10k change.

Andersen's 22kW charge speed transformed the Mini experience

Goodbye

MINI COOPER SE MONTH 6

Ecology of economy

An upgraded home charger makes Mini life cheaper. By **Piers Ward**

The story so far

Mini's sense of fun will be missed, lack of interior space less so

+ Fun handling; infotainment; styling

- Efficiency plunged in winter; tiny boot and rear seats

Logbook

Price £34,500 (£39,799 as tested) **Performance** 49kWh battery, e-motor, 215bhp, 6.7sec 0-62mph, 106mph **Efficiency** 4.2-4.4 miles per kWh (official), 3.4 miles per kWh (tested) **Range** 240-249 miles (official), 167 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 6.0p per mile **Miles this month** 463 **Total miles** 6298

At last, I've got my home energy ecosystem all sorted. Like *CAR*'s equivalent of Martin Lewis, I'm making savings everywhere. Efficiency is my watchword.

It's all thanks to two upgrades. One is from Eon Next, which has joined Octopus and others in offering cheap overnight electricity rates – just 6p per kWh. The other is from Andersen, a British company that offers stylish car chargers at 7kW and, assuming you have a three-phase connection, 22kW speeds, which is rare for domestic chargers. Going for 22kW means you can dump juice into the Mini at its maximum 11kW AC rate, so it'll fully charge at the cheaper Eon tariff.

Cheap tariff and efficient charger combined to allow me to charge the Mini from zero to 100 per cent for less than the cost of a pint. Even during the winter, when the car's efficiency plunged from a summer high of 4.93 miles per kWh to a low of 2.49, it still meant cheap journeys. The car's overall pence per mile figure actually dropped recently, despite that efficiency fall in cold weather.

Getting the Andersen installed was simple. As with a lot of these companies, you need a site survey first. But unlike some others, the installers are all Andersen employees, not sub-contractors. That gives a reassuring continuity of service. It comes with a unique, seven-year warranty and, thanks to the hidden tethered cable, never looks untidy.

Not that it's cheap. The total bill came to £2844 including VAT, but my ancient house, with its bespoke requirements, did cause the final number to balloon more than it would on a standard install.

What all this has done is emphasise how easy and cheap electric cars can be, once you've got your infrastructure sorted. Despite the Mini's small 49kW battery, I only needed to use a public charger once in nearly 5000 miles. On that occasion, with the Mini app being incredibly unhelpful, I came close to being stranded – quite a contrast to the ease and convenience of charging at home. That was the only blot on the Mini's record, aside from the tiny boot.

Overall, it's been a remarkably easy car to enjoy. Right-sized for UK parking spaces, the Cooper SE has spent six months darting and nipping and generally entertaining, with a sense of engagement lacking in a lot of other EVs. The steering was the highlight for me, not in terms of feel but more the way it is so pin sharp, reacting well to the exuberant torque steer. There was never a dull journey thanks to how fighty those fronts tyres could be under full power – pulling out of junctions became a lesson in restraint.

It's an impressive car, with the warm glow boosted by the pleasingly low running costs.

Count the cost

Cost new £39,799 **Part exchange** £25,855 **Cost per mile** 6.0p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £2.26

Grille wins no fans; steering is fab, though

Goodbye

BMW i5 TOURING MONTH 7

United on one thing

Lots to argue about, but the price bothers everyone. By **Ben Whitworth**

The story so far

Readers offer some fresh perspectives on our i5 estate
+ Plenty of typically BMW goodness to be found here...
- ...but it's diluted by some unexpected mediocrity

Logbook

Price £78,450 (£94,995 as tested) **Performance** 81.2kWh battery, e-motor, 340bhp, 6.1sec 0-62mph, 120mph **Efficiency** 3.7 miles per kWh (official), 2.7 miles per kWh (tested) **Energy cost** 3.5p per mile **Miles this month** 2015 **Total miles** 9199

With just over 9000 miles covered in the BMW, I feel I've really got under its skin and beyond its £94,995 price tag to see its pros and cons. But what would a trio of readers make of it?

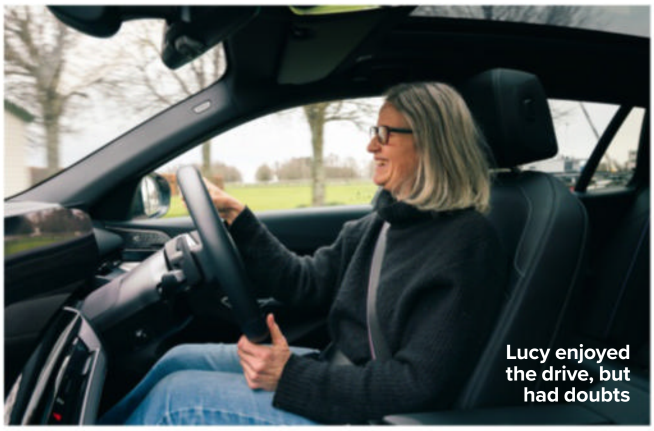
Lucy Wilson is head of Chichester-based interior design studio Walnutblue. Her daily drive is a much-loved leased Mazda CX-30 that has to cover both her work and private transport requirements.

'I really dislike all that black shiny plastic around the grille, and those wheels look like they'll be a kerbing nightmare.' Not a good start, and things don't improve from the driver's seat. 'It's so much smaller in here than I expected. Sure, the boot is a decent size, but I don't think my three teenagers would find it comfortable in the back.'

Accustomed to her more analogue CX-30, she finds the i5's cockpit challenging. 'It feels like there's a lot of technology crammed in here, and I'd question how much would I actually use every day.'

Out on the road, Lucy falls for the i5's winning combination of performance, refinement and dynamism. 'It feels impressively robust and solid doesn't it? Very sophisticated and silent on the move, with a ride quality that's much smoother and quieter than my Mazda. For a big car it's pretty impressive through the corners and there's plenty of punch, too. Pity that bonnet is so long, though, because it makes the cameras a necessity for junctions and parking.'

A mixed bag, then, but it's the BMW's cost and range that put's Lucy firmly in the nice-but-no camp. 'I just don't see how I could ever justify over £1200 a month for a car that struggles to get more than 220 miles on a full charge, no mat-


Lucy enjoyed the drive, but had doubts

ter how lovely it is to drive.'

Adrian Cocks – electrician, plumber and chartered mechanical engineer – runs Blueberry Bathrooms. He loves his cars – there's a million-mile Yaris for local trips, an immaculate Discovery 4 for family work, and a fastidiously maintained Aston Martin Vantage. He too is floored by the cost.

'As someone who has always purchased secondhand cars, the price of this is absolutely eye-watering. That aside, it's lovely to drive, with none of the turbo lag I have in the Discovery, or having to drop two or three gears in the Aston. In this you just rocket along, with more than enough smooth and seamless acceleration. It was very easy to just get in and drive once the seat and steering wheel positions were sorted. But 200-odd miles between recharges – it may be cheap to run but you pay for the privilege.'

Adrian, Justin and Lucy give Ben their views

Lucy falls for the i5's winning combination of performance, refinement and dynamism

Justin Bosanquet is a news editor at BFBS Forces News, and took the EV plunge back in 2020 with a Nissan Leaf. He then sold the family Mercedes B-Class and replaced it with a new MG ZS EV. So would an i5 be next on his list? 'Not at this price. Our 24kWh Leaf gives us 85 miles but this has an 81.2kWh battery and only returns 220 miles. Look, it's a pleasure to drive because it's quick and punchy, it rides very well and you can really chuck it into the corners. But it's also pretty tight in the cabin for such a long and wide car, and even to someone accustomed to driving electric cars, I found the onboard tech hard to access and somewhat intimidating.'

His impressions chime with my six-month take on the i5: it's a combination of excellence, mediocrity and frustration.

Count the cost

Cost new £94,995 **Part exchange** £53,718 **Cost per mile** 3.5p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £4.53

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Our road testers rank the best cars currently available in 12 categories, and highlight the ones to buy

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: The Top 5s

TOP 5 HOT HATCHES

The sore thumb in the current Honda line-up

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

THE GOOD: Feel, feedback, focus: a phenomenal full-sized hot hatch

THE BAD: Now £50,050 for a front-drive hatchback with barely any more power than before

THE UGLY: Probably the last of its kind; good job it's one of the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one model; £429 a month on a three-year PCP with a £10k deposit

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

TOYOTA GR YARIS

THE GOOD: A modern-day rally homologation special that's thrilling to drive

THE BAD: Road noise like a death-metal gig; joke rear seats

THE UGLY: Long waiting list, even with some versions priced at £60,000, although it starts at £44,250

THE ONE TO BUY: Now has optional auto but go for the manual

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

VW GOLF R

THE GOOD: Superb Mk8.5 update makes this a seriously good and usefully quick all-rounder

THE BAD: Pity the Mk8 wasn't that already

THE UGLY: Still not quite there with the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: Estate is about £1.5k more than the hatch and more practical but not so sharp

GIANT TEST WINNER

4

AUDI RS3

THE GOOD: Want a five-cylinder hot hatch? Your option is RS3, with five or four doors

THE BAD: Now £60k; small boot for both

THE UGLY: RS is still better, but S3 does a lot for less money and is impressive in its own right

THE ONE TO BUY: £60,105 for the hatch; an extra grand for the saloon

5

VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

THE GOOD: Rare mix of supreme comfort, hatchback versatility and cornering bite

THE BAD: The stats don't really shine in a 2025 context

THE UGLY: Mk8.5 a definite improvement, but interface still offers plenty to gripe about

THE ONE TO BUY: £42,155 for a very good Golf is pretty decent value

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TOP 5 SPORTS CARS

What a thing to be alive in this golden age of sports cars

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

PORSCHE 911

THE GOOD: Exquisite blend of power, accuracy, excitement, style and usability, and new GTS integrates hybrid beautifully

THE BAD: You have to look down to #3 in this category to see the affordable performance Porsche; most basic 911 barely scrapes in at just under £100k

THE UGLY: It keeps getting bigger and heavier

THE ONE TO BUY: That basic Carrera is ace, and it's hard to imagine you'll regret it for a minute. But if you want more power and more trickery then Porsche has plenty of ways to take more of your money

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

ARIEL ATOM

THE GOOD: A beautiful object as well as a thrilling drive; think of it as a modernised Lotus Seven crossed with a high-end sportsbike

THE BAD: You'll need bike-style wet-weather gear if it's raining. And at least £40k – this is an expensive toy, if a captivating one

THE UGLY: The 4R is even more bonkers

THE ONE TO BUY: Do you really need the 350bhp optional power upgrade?

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN/BOXSTER

THE GOOD: Sublime handling; surprising practicality

THE BAD: Less characterful than an Alpine; a boringly obvious choice (but not one bit boring to drive)

THE UGLY: Flat-four versions sound like a VW Beetle in a duet with Eeyore

THE ONE TO BUY: GT4 RS the most thrilling, Spyder is ace, but flat-six GTS 4.0 is a cut-price GT4 at around £75k

4

LOTUS EMIRA

THE GOOD: The first new combustion Lotus in years is fantastically well resolved. Usable, desirable and thrilling

THE BAD: Harder work to live with than a Cayman

THE UGLY: The last petrol Lotus, at least for now – just as the firm gets the bucks to build on its brilliance

THE ONE TO BUY: AMG-sourced four is an interesting but pricey option, but the Toyota 3.5-litre V6 suits it better

5

ALPINE A110

THE GOOD: The perfectly formed antidote to a world of excess; a modern classic in every sense of the term

THE BAD: Two boots, neither big, and not much oddment storage inside

THE UGLY: 'R' is 34kg lighter – some effort – but also nearly £100k. Too much

THE ONE TO BUY: A110 S adds handling poise for £67,490 but £54,490 base A110 is all you need; enjoy it before it goes electric

TOP 5 GRAND TOURERS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

FERRARI ROMA

THE GOOD: Style, speed and sensuous lines; a car for, and from, a bygone age

THE BAD: An age in which we no longer live, tragically

THE UGLY: Baffling steering-wheel touchpads; strangled exhaust note

THE ONE TO BUY: The cabrio. Arguably even more beautiful to look at from outside

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

THE GOOD: Luxury, power, agility and a great-looking body

THE BAD: Nope, it's really sorted

THE UGLY: Just because it's always been heavy and thirsty won't stop us complaining that it's heavy and thirsty

THE ONE TO BUY: Plug-in hybrid range-topper is the most powerful Bentley ever, and so much more besides

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

PORSCHE 911 TURBO

THE GOOD: Hypercar-bothering pace, any road, any weather

THE BAD: Only fun when you're really going for it

THE UGLY: Turbo has never been good for depreciation; even less so recently

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry car plenty fast enough but £180,600 Turbo S outsells it; add £10k for a Convertible

PORSCHE TAYCAN CROSS TURISMO

THE GOOD: Raised ride height absolutely monsters lumpy UK roads

THE BAD: Not actually that practical

THE UGLY: Audi's e-Tron GT gets the nicer cockpit

THE ONE TO BUY: Revised version has arrived, along with revised prices: 4S Cross Turismo is now £100,400, and range hits £162k

ASTON MARTIN DB12

THE GOOD: Effortlessly beautiful DB11 replacement now has the traction to make the most of the rampant turbo V8's stomp. Excellent interior

THE BAD: Choosing between this and the Vanquish

THE UGLY: Aston simply doesn't do ugly

THE ONE TO BUY: Coupe is £185k; Volante the stunner

TOP 5 COUPES AND CABRIOS

BMW M2

THE GOOD: The longitudinal-engined two-door BMW coupe lives

THE BAD: Bigger and heavier than we'd like but outrageous fun

THE UGLY: You need £66k to get involved; steering can feel a shade rubbery

THE ONE TO BUY: Manual or auto transmission options – get the knob. We'd go M carbon seats, too

MASERATI MC20

THE GOOD: A no-excuses excellent Maserati. Handling and ride to match the looks; a GT as well as a sports car

THE BAD: Throttle could be sharper in normal mode

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you did mean to buy the Maser and not the 296

THE ONE TO BUY: The droptop Cielo. All the coupe's go with added style

MERCEDES-AMG SL

THE GOOD: Latest SL is developed by AMG but it's still a cruiser, and all the better for it

THE BAD: Engines are still better than the ride and handling

THE UGLY: Cabin designed by touchpad scattergun

THE ONE TO BUY: The £148k, 469bhp SL55; also look at the coupe cousin, the AMG GT

MAZDA MX-5

THE GOOD: Closest thing to a modern-day Lotus Elan; genius folds-flat-in-seconds roof

THE BAD: Lashings of bodyroll; the 1.5 can't climb hills

THE UGLY: If you're over 6ft tall you simply won't fit

THE ONE TO BUY: Motorised-metal-roof RF doesn't quite make sense; 1.5 starts at £28k, punchier 2.0 from £32k with an LSD

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

THE GOOD: Fast and comfortable, and utterly gorgeous

THE BAD: Gets very thirsty without too much provocation

THE UGLY: DB12 and Vantage are also very good

THE ONE TO BUY: £333,000 will get you a very fine long, low, two-seat sports car/GT/near-supercar coupe

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUPERCARS

FERRARI 296 GTB

THE GOOD: Timeless styling and a driving experience as good as any of Maranello's finest

THE BAD: You need reflexes like a fighter pilot to drive it as fast as it can go

THE UGLY: Touch-sensitive steering-wheel pads make the interface borderline unusable

THE ONE TO BUY: Fiorano pack is £25k+ overkill. GTS adds sunshine

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

THE GOOD: Spine-tingling sound; 9000rpm redline; total immersion

THE BAD: Nothing to see here

THE UGLY: Getting on the waiting list is like winning both *The X Factor* and *The Apprentice*

THE ONE TO BUY: RS is somehow more focused than the GT3 but more road-compliant at the same time. How do they do it?

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

THE GOOD: The monstrous, naturally-aspirated V12 lives on – now e-boosted and wrapped in such a hard-to-crash package insurance should be a tenner. Vastly improved cabin, too

THE BAD: Price has skyrocketed

THE UGLY: EV-only range is six miles

THE ONE TO BUY: There is only one for now

MCLAREN 750S

THE GOOD: Lighter, more powerful, better: evolution of 720S is another corker from Woking

THE BAD: 30 per cent new but you'd struggle to tell

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you actually bought the new car

THE ONE TO BUY: Stick to the comfort-spec seats and avoid the harnesses on the top 'super carbon' ones

CHEVROLET CORVETTE Z06

THE GOOD: A beautifully balanced performance package that can stand tall among the supercar aristocracy

THE BAD: Interior quality and kit not quite there

THE UGLY: Will future electrification kill the thrill?

THE ONE TO BUY: Add the Z07 pack for upgraded aero, suspension, brakes and wheels; expect to pay £140k

TOP 5 PLUG-IN HYBRIDS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

BMW X5 50E

THE GOOD: Massive 67-mile official e-range; horizon-eating performance

THE BAD: Hybrid hardware cuts into boot space to the tune of 150 litres; no seven-seat option

THE UGLY: Not much now that the facelifted 50e model with more e-range and power is here

THE ONE TO BUY: This one, for £82k; it will serve you well

FORD KUGA

THE GOOD: Facelift has brought better efficiency, and it still drives very well

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't great, although fuel consumption's good

THE UGLY: Not so much ugly as dowdy, particularly the interior – not a patch on the electric Explorer

THE ONE TO BUY: PHEV in ST-Line X trim can be had for £42,455

PORSCHE CAYENNE

THE GOOD: Handling; driver focus; choice of body styles; 0-62mph in 5.0sec

THE BAD: Bigger battery for facelift model but still can't match the X5

THE UGLY: The front passenger touchscreen: £1000 and not needed

THE ONE TO BUY: If you value the U in SUV, avoid the coupe – even if it is a great steer

VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN

THE GOOD: Mk3 is bigger than ever but still a neat all-round package. Choice of 201 and 268bhp PHEVs, both with 62-mile e-range

THE BAD: Room for improvement with the infotainment

THE UGLY: People are buying Tiguans instead of Golfs, in huge numbers

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for either of the eHybrids in good-value Match trim

BMW 330E

THE GOOD: Goes sub-six to 62mph and up to 41 electric miles on a charge

THE BAD: Engine is slightly coarse; plain 330i is less heavy, more fun

THE UGLY: Hybrid kit eats into boot space so regular 3s are roomier

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of saloon or estate. Handsome, vaguely affordable 330e Sport Touring is £48,785

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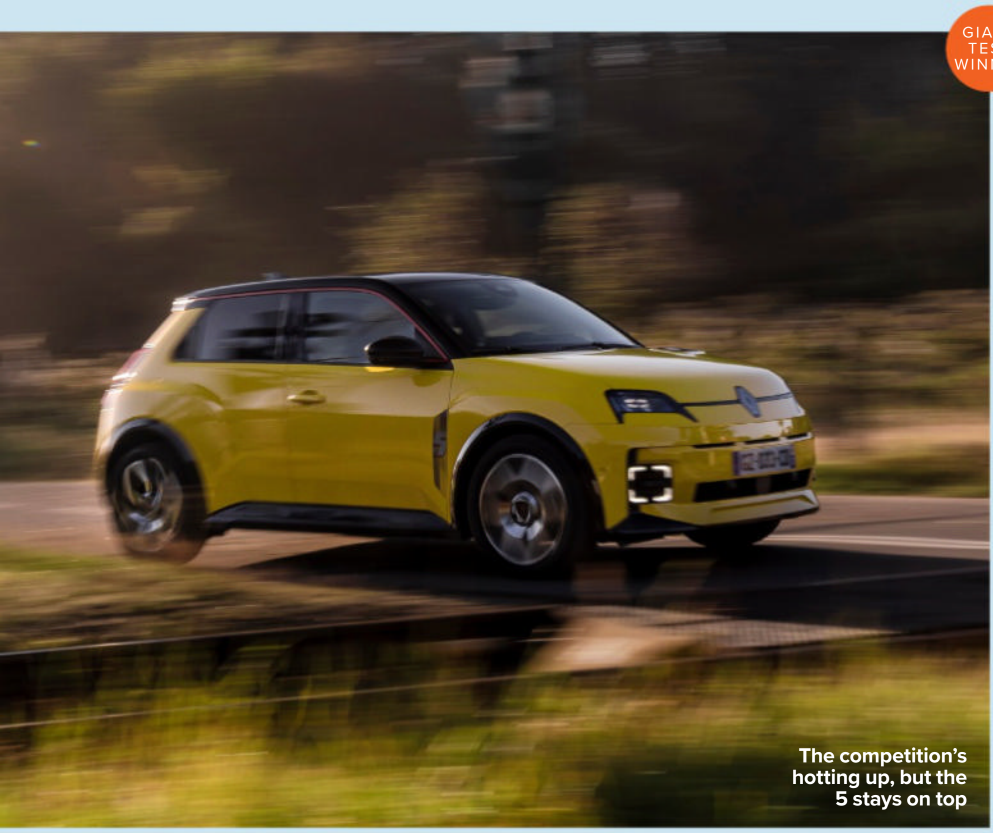
TOP 5 ELECTRIC CARS



The competition's hotting up, but the 5 stays on top

RENAULT 5 E-TECH

THE GOOD: The way it looks, the way it drives, the keen pricing – but it's also refreshingly practical, with five doors, a usable rear bench, and good efficiency, too

THE BAD: Fiddly gear selector stalk; no frunk

THE UGLY: What ugly? Look at it

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry point is £22,995 but we'd splash a few more grand on mid-spec Techno, which gets the '5' charging indicator on the bonnet and other desirable bits of kit, plus the option of the bigger battery, 52 rather than 40kWh

GIANT TEST WINNER

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

THE GOOD: Electric and exciting – synthetic drive modes and gearchange are game changers

THE BAD: Breadth of configurability takes getting used to. Ignore that it's software-driven – it feels real

THE UGLY: Interior quality below par for a £65k car

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one model; paint and a sunroof the only options – all the drive modes are included

PORSCHE TAYCAN

THE GOOD: Totally overhauled but still fast, responsive and fluid; now more efficient

THE BAD: Info screen in front of the passenger is faintly ridiculous

THE UGLY: Prices are all up, and be aware of poor demand for used Taycans

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £86.5k for the rear-drive basic Taycan; you can pay a lot more and get a bit more performance

KIA EV3

THE GOOD: Roomy and clever interior; great value for such long range; funky looks – it's a shrunken EV9 or EV6

THE BAD: Air trim feels cheap inside, but only when compared to bigger Kia EVs

THE UGLY: That weird climate-control screen

THE ONE TO BUY: The 270-mile-range car is brilliant value but most will want the longer-range option. GT-Line is our pick for value-to-comfort goodness

RENAULT SCENIC

THE GOOD: Good value; long range; pleasant to drive; looks smart inside and out

THE BAD: Sometimes lumpy ride; poor rear visibility; rear seats don't slide or do other family-friendly tricks

THE UGLY: The boot is very deep, but not actually that big, and you have to pay extra for a variable floor

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the big battery in Techno trim; your family will thank you

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TOP 5 SUVS/CROSSOVERS

You see Defenders everywhere for good reason

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

THE GOOD: Reboot brings untold dynamic improvements wherever you drive

THE BAD: Second-row access is a pain in the 90; expensive; 130 in particular is very big, so parking can be tricky

THE UGLY: Very nice inside, so you're wary of getting it muddy

THE ONE TO BUY: Range spans 90, 110 and 130 bodies, with significantly different dimensions but remarkably similar character and the genuine off-road ability that Land Rover always delivers so convincingly. Heart says Octa or petrol V8 90, head/wallet say diesel-six D250 110

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

PORSCHE MACAN

THE GOOD: The new one is electric – and as impressive as the outgoing combustion version

THE BAD: As family transport it has flaws, especially boot space

THE UGLY: Don't want EV? You'll need to be quick (or wait for the rumoured return of engines)

THE ONE TO BUY: Starts at £67k and goes up to £95k for the Turbo; £70k 4 offers all you could sensibly want

3

ASTON MARTIN DBX 707

THE GOOD: Now with a much improved interior, the DBX keeps the glorious noise, masterful balance, rear-axle bias and surprising practicality

THE BAD: High fuel consumption and emissions from the twin-turbo V8

THE UGLY: There's no longer a non-707 version, so you need to pay top dollar

THE ONE TO BUY: The 707 will cost you around £210k

4

MERCEDES G-CLASS

THE GOOD: Rejigged range spans diesel, petrol, AMG and EV, and they're all good: agile off-road, smooth and comfy on-road

THE BAD: It's all a bit fancy; how do you feel about muddy wellies?

THE UGLY: Merc's premium mission means it's a posh version or nothing

THE ONE TO BUY: Electric is astonishingly good, but painfully expensive at £180k-plus

5

INEOS QUARTERMASTER

THE GOOD: Pick-up version of the Grenadier has a long wheelbase that if anything improves the handling

THE BAD: Not very roomy for passengers

THE UGLY: Isuzus are much cheaper, if far less cool

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £66k, but a Trialmaster edition at £74k brings together a practical and good-looking set of extras

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TOP 5 LUXURY CARS

GIANT
TEST
WIN
1

RANGE ROVER

THE GOOD: Masterful and hugely desirable reinvention of an icon. An EV version is due soon

THE BAD: Reliability remains a worry. EV likely to be extremely heavy

THE UGLY: The D350 mild-hybrid straight-six diesel is sublime. Can you live with the guilt?

THE ONE TO BUY: The above (from £107k), though the V8 is fun

ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

THE GOOD: Money-no-object pinnacle of serenity and craftsmanship

THE BAD: Is this really you? And is this really appropriate in 2025?

THE UGLY: Filthy-money associations

THE ONE TO BUY: It's 'standard' or long-wheelbase, from £380k. All cars are built to order and most owners spend £500k

GIANT
TEST
WINNER
3

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

THE GOOD: Now a hybrid V8, the Spur has great performance and poise plus decent e-range

THE BAD: Other VW Group cars get even smarter chassis tech

THE UGLY: Lots of emphasis on expensive options, so brace your credit card

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the Speed, from £266,500

MERCEDES S-CLASS

THE GOOD: Tech-fest with timeless waftability. Few cars are more calming

THE BAD: Surprisingly unrefined petrol six; doesn't ride as well as it should

THE UGLY: Trying not to crash while using the Hyperscreen

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid 580e works best. That's £114k in entry AMG Line Premium trim

ROLLS-ROYCE SPECTRE

THE GOOD: A joy to drive, and exquisitely built

THE BAD: Efficiency not great

THE UGLY: Fabulous detailing and engineering will benefit so few

THE ONE TO BUY: It's £330k in theory, but in reality, as every one is spec'd from a large and flexible options list, it's going to cost you more than £400,000

TOP 5 FAMILY CARS

BIG
SELLER
1

BMW 3-SERIES

THE GOOD: On-the-deck driving position; dreamy handling balance; slick interior; 50 years on, a brilliant car to drive and live with

THE BAD: Knowing you've made the obvious choice

THE UGLY: You'll need an M340i or M340d for six cylinders

THE ONE TO BUY: 330e if you want a hybrid; 320i if you're on a budget

GIANT
TEST
WINNER
2

BMW 5-SERIES

THE GOOD: Much has changed; still great. Handling defines the class

THE BAD: It's now a very hefty car

THE UGLY: Is nowhere safe? Even the tradition-embracing 5-series gets a full EV option in the form of the i5

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £51,915 for the 520i but can easily exceed £80k (and the M5's well into six figures)

DACIA JOGGER

THE GOOD: Seven seats; massive boot with the rear row removed; prices start just over £18k

THE BAD: Sandero base means it's a bit narrow; spartan

THE UGLY: Low Euro NCAP score, although it's pretty safe in a crash

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid usefully punchier than petrol, but much clunkier. PCP a steal at £184 a month

VOLKSWAGEN ID. 7

THE GOOD: The most coherent ID to date now in a choice of hatch and estate. Not posh, but highly agreeable

THE BAD: Frumpy styling and that still sub-par interface

THE UGLY: So few electric estates to choose from

THE ONE TO BUY: Pro Match with 77kWh battery does the job just fine, priced from £51,500 for the hatch

AUDI A6 E-TRON

THE GOOD: Electric saloon and estate is refined, quick and pretty sharp, with a typically smart cabin and decent range

THE BAD: Rear passenger room isn't great

THE UGLY: Audi's constant model name changes are just confusing

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the £69k rear-wheel-drive A6 e-Tron Sport Performance

TOP 5 FAMILY HATCHES

BMW 1-SERIES

THE GOOD: Premium and practical, and a lot more normal than the original 1-series

THE BAD: Actually a bit too normal for some tastes

THE UGLY: Facelift has dialled down the ugly, thankfully

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of £30k mild-hybrid front-drive 120 and £41k all-wheel-drive 296bhp M135; both good, if a bit much for some tastes

PEUGEOT 208

THE GOOD: Style; big-car character; knockout interior; EV version available

THE BAD: So-so handling; a squash for adult rear-seat passengers

THE UGLY: Dumping the wheel in your lap like a TV dinner to see the dials clearly

THE ONE TO BUY: Range from £21k, but £26k GT is worth saving up for. Bright colour is best

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

MINI COUNTRYMAN

THE GOOD: Wonderful interior and all-round feelgood factor from the big five-door

THE BAD: You need to be in the mood for the built-in zaniness

THE UGLY: Options can send the price into the stratosphere

THE ONE TO BUY: Your basic Countryman C Classic is just fine at a sniff over £30k

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

THE GOOD: Brain-out default choice still a solid all-rounder; ride, visibility, roominess

THE BAD: Seat Leon a very similar package for a lower price

THE UGLY: Revised Mk8.5 version just a bit better, especially the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 TSI 150 Match at £28,375; roomy estate is also great value

FIAT GRANDE PANDA

THE GOOD: Remarkably roomy, keenly priced, charming and useful

THE BAD: Not the sharpest or quickest

THE UGLY: Everything looks a little plain next to a Renault 5

THE ONE TO BUY: £21k entry point or £24k for the better-kitted posh version; EV for now, hybrid will follow

TOP 5 SPORTS SALOONS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

BMW M3

THE GOOD: Mighty straight-six; front axle's never-give-up attitude; dreamy chassis balance

THE BAD: No manual; nearly 911 money now

THE UGLY: M3 Touring £88k new but now changing hands for much less

THE ONE TO BUY: The CS, if you were lucky enough to bag one of the 100 brought here. Used Touring is a good secondhand buy

MERCEDES-AMG S63

THE GOOD: V8 plus e-motor shows AMG can do a great performance hybrid, and in the most unlikely of places: a huge luxury saloon

THE BAD: Boot size suffers, and ride quality isn't perfect

THE UGLY: It's a pity this approach wasn't applied to the latest C63

THE ONE TO BUY: Two versions, both at £189k, one with more black trim

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

BMW M5

THE GOOD: Very rapid, ridiculously agile and refreshingly low on emissions; a clever reboot in PHEV form

THE BAD: Lots of modes, and an odd amount of wind noise; more divisive than previous M5s

THE UGLY: Heavy and expensive, so it's not that clever

THE ONE TO BUY: £113,405 for the Touring; £2k less for the saloon

ALFA GIULIA QUADRIFOGLIO

THE GOOD: Charisma in spades, fantastic agility and almost as good as an M3 to drive

THE BAD: Emphasis on *almost* as good as an M3 to drive

THE UGLY: Flaky interior quality; infotainment still lags behind the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one, wonderful, model from £79,495

PORSCHE PANAMERA

THE GOOD: New version builds on success of the very fine model it replaces

THE BAD: Barely a saloon – four-up is okay, but forget five

THE UGLY: Estate version is no longer available, even though it was the best looker

THE ONE TO BUY: £79,500 gets the base model; Turbo E-Hybrid at £141k now tops the range

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NEW TAVASCAN
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CUPRA

For the daring few. The new CUPRA Tavascan is here to redefine performance with its bold, unconventional design and state-of-the-art technology. Our first all-electric SUV coupé, crafted for those who defy the ordinary.

Maximum range on a full charge for a CUPRA Tavascan is 298.9 - 353.6 miles (official test WLTP figures) depending on the trim. Official fuel consumption for the Tavascan mpg (litres/100km) combined: N/A. Combined CO_2 emissions: 0g/km. Test data obtained under standardised conditions after the battery had been fully charged (to 100%). The Tavascan is a battery electric vehicle requiring mains electricity for charging. Figures shown are for comparability purposes and may vary by trim. Only compare fuel consumption, CO_2 and electric range figures with other vehicles tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the starting charge of the battery, accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles, route conditions, speed, vehicle and battery age and vehicle load. Zero emissions while driving. Data correct at December 2024.